

## **Manoel de Oliveira and the reconciliation between theatre and cinema: forms and resources for the audiovisual preservation of theatre in his films.**

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**Abstract:** The extensive, enigmatic, and singular work of the Portuguese filmmaker Manoel de Oliveira (1908-2015) has been analysed from many perspectives, emphasising the importance of literary adaptations and the historical and cultural contexts in which the main characters are situated, as well as the pictorial or visual references. This research, however focuses on ways of integrating and preserving theater within the language of film, particularly those produced in the 1970s and 1980s. This study selects and analyzes some of the characteristics and features of the theatrical forms identified in Manoel de Oliveira's films, and unravels them. These include the use of spaces and frames to denote narratives, the duality between the static and the dynamic, and the importance of the spoken word in his films.

Keywords: Manoel de Oliveira - Portuguese cinema - Theatre - Intertextuality - Filmic language

### **Introduction: the art of filming words**

The long creative career of Portuguese film director Manoel de Oliveira (1908-2015) reached a turning point in the 1970s, when his films gradually began to attract the attention not only of the scholars of cinematography, but also of aesthetics and theatrical performance. It was then, after an absence of two-decades, that the director resumed his film career, imbued with unique themes and forms and far removed from the cinematic canons in vogue at the time. The films he directed on his return won him recognition from critics and film scholars, who categorised his work as the films of broken loves or the tetralogy of Frustrated Loves, as defined by Portuguese critics. These include such works as Past and Present (*O Passado e o Presente*, 1971), Benilde or the Virgin Mother (*Benilde ou a Virgem Mãe*, 1975), Doomed Love (*Amor de Perdição*, 1978) and Francisca (1981), among others. Unlike their filmic counterparts, these works moved away from many of the prevailing features of contemporary filmmaking, exploring a new and unusual path drawing on historical and literary references, as well as obvious cultural references from philosophy and theatre. The filmmaker thus pre-empted the term “contemporary auteur” which various scholars have used to categorise other authors from the 1980s to the end of the twentieth century. From that point on, Manoel de Oliveira gradually built up an international reputation, firstly among film critics and later among film scholars and academics, portraying himself as an older director, far removed from the usual star-director approach of creating very personal

works. During the same decade, critics, often puzzled, searched for clues to interpret and define his work. As a result of this interest, various interviews, profiles and television reports can be found, such as Costa (1981), Costa Andrade (2008) and Araújo (2014), which provide some clues to unravel the ambiguity and strangeness sometimes evoked by his films. Lavin (2008) also analyses one of the pertinent aspects of Oliveira's cinema, namely the recurring theme of frustrated, doomed love and dysfunctional marriages. It is particularly noteworthy, and especially for the purposes of this text, how these authors highlight the dialectical, problematic relationship between word and image, with numerous pauses and delays, leading to a sense of strangeness in the spectator and a breakdown in the natural narrative flow in the filmic story. Other notable aspects of his work, which show a degree of continuity throughout his career, include his collaboration with Paulo Branco and Agustina Bessa-Luís, his preference for literary adaptations, historical and cultural themes, and his many references to Impressionist painting.

In general, the author depicts an unusual interaction between cinematographic representation and the becoming of life, which he often resolves by introducing theatrical elements and techniques, an aspect that has not been sufficiently studied by his critics and academic scholars, and which is ultimately the perspective adopted in this study. This research seeks to investigate how Manuel de Oliveira uses forms and resources to give value to theatre as an art form, to preserve theatre within cinema.

### **Obsessions and enigmas in Manoel de Oliveira's work**

Before beginning an analysis of Oliveira's main films in order to identify elements such as theatrical devices and references in the Portuguese filmmaker's work, it is also worth taking a look at the main critical and theoretical references to his work. Although not specifically theatrical, other critical studies have pinpointed elements that in some way foreshadow or frame a filmic execution verging on theatre. In this regard, attention has been drawn to the links between his work and photography, painting, philosophy, literary and historical references and, last but not least, a unique and highly personal fusion of arts and knowledge.

For Király (2018), one of the leading scholars of Oliveira's work, the visual excess characteristic of the Portuguese director's films is simply a depiction of his obsession with the uncertainty of life and death, history and time. It is a combination of his attraction to sinister or bizarre themes and a style that, on the face of it, often feels familiar, but is then overthrown, parodied or interrupted in the most surprising way. The power of the word and its seduction is the form that many of Oliveira's films take as a way of exploring that for which we have no answer, giving them depth, both spatially and temporally. The Portuguese filmmaker himself has a special temporal treatment in his films, allowing time to invade the spectator with meanings. In his own words, "The shot takes on another meaning with its duration. You see other movements and details. Time is available (...) Nothing is happening, but something has happened" (Bæcque and Parsi, 1999, 141)

By blurring the boundaries of media and those that exist between movement and the static, between life and death, cinematic stillness is revealed as a *trompe l'oeil*. In Oliveira's films, the death scenes involve very long takes intended to capture the moment of transition from movement to stillness, from the cinematographic to the photographic or pictorial. The importance given to cunning framing and the different examples of temporal and spatial manipulation he uses in his work, such as fixed frames, long takes, slow motion, zooms or superimpositions, tighten the narrative by calling attention to the film's visual textures.

Referring to heritage cinema, and on framing and spatial and temporal manipulations, Vidal affirms that "throws into relief the tension between discursive and figural dimensions of film" (Vidal 2012, 111), and in some way this is also found in the work of the Portuguese filmmaker: it is about forms and resources for the audiovisual preservation of the theater. Annette Kuhn also points out that this experience is due to a particular configuration of space within and outside the borders of the film image, the film frame, which provides cinema the ability of "extending the idea of transitional processes of the organization of space within the outside edges of film image, the film frame, I would argue, permits us to consider how film can engage us in a particular sort of aesthetic experience" (Kuhn 2005, 403).

### **Materials and methods**

Calculated ambiguity, polysemy and intertextuality are problematic aspects in analyzing the author's work. The search for theatrical references in the complex work of Manoel de Oliveira has required a mixture of methodological elements and techniques that include content analysis and qualitative methodology, as well as taking an interpretative and comparative approach to this analysis. Therefore, this research is based on the deductive method from which the key concepts and the relevant theory have been established in the process of searching for the films that are most representative of this theatrical influence. The authors of this paper have constructed a methodology appropriate to the case study which is primarily based on theorizing from a critical literature review of the director. Adopting a comparative approach, we look for the transcoding processes of theatrical forms in filmic narrative, based on the assumption of their relational dimension. Comparative methods are based on the assumption that a work should not be considered only as an absolute, but also in its different concretions and in its possible relational links (Brunel and Chevrel 2004, 200). Secondly, the research mechanism includes a hermeneutic approach using the multiple case study method (Yin, 2017), and these cases become paradigmatic given their singularity and referential nature. Various cases are examined in this study, significant films by Oliveira in which the theatrical influence is clearly identified, allowing comparisons to be made and general conclusions to be drawn from a multidisciplinary, comparative approach to filmmaking. Comparative film research analyses the ways in which an image alludes to and calls to mind other images or other filmic texts, and the relationship between film and the other arts.

## **Results. Theatrical forms and devices in Oliveira's films**

The audiovisual preservation of theatre has been an obsession that has marked Manoel de Oliveira's (1981, 38) career as a filmmaker. For the Portuguese director, the purpose of cinema, as an immaterial art, is to recreate the living art of the theatre where the dramatic universe and that of performance coexist, and the spectator is aware of the simultaneous presence of both. This is done through staging and also through processes of visual sophistication and storytelling. For example, Oliveira's films usually begin with a fragment of an almost documentary nature, in a form similar to "auto", a theatrical work whose origin dates back to medieval times.

Oliveira's filmmaking, as a fiction-making system, is concerned with narrating events so that they endure as both constructs and performances. In this way, cinema and theatre are both necessary and related in his work in what could be called an artistic continuum, where the most intense cinematographic authenticity is countered by questioning the idea of performance through the incorporation of theatrical intertexts that highlight the artificiality of the whole: division into acts, story concentration, contrived sets, the importance and omnipresence of the actor, the explicitness of the act of enunciation (an appeal to the spectator), or the rigorous adherence to the dramatic text, as in the adaptation of Paul Claudel's *Le soulier du satin* (1985), a film that owes much to theatre from the beginning in which the use of the dramatic device aside is evident. The camera is in the foyer of a theatre and the usher, situated in the centre of the frame, like a theatrical proscenium, faces the spectators and announces what is about to happen. He then opens the theatre doors while the front-facing and static camera is invaded by the spectators on their way to the stalls where the images will begin to be projected because, as Oliveira confesses to Jacques Parsi and Antoine de Baecque, the limits of cinema always resemble the theatre thanks to the so-called framing (1996, 81): "On the screen you see all the action and all the bodies contained in a concentrated space, within the limits of the framing which, if you wanted, could be called theatrical space, because theatrical and cinematographic space are the same thing".

In theatrical performance, the frames and limits of the mode of performance itself become evident to the spectator. This also occurs in the Portuguese filmmaker's work, seasoned as it is with a characteristic emotional and narrative excess that often consists of long and passionate dialogues, visually inserted in baroque and excessive ways, together with continuous use of frames, mirrors, and pictorial compositions. Frames and mirrors are common metaphors in the 1970s films of the Portuguese master and are used both as limits of performance, as ways of limiting the action of the main characters, which is connected to theatrical performance, and also as a *trompe l'oeil* so that a door or the frame of a window can be mistaken for a mirror by the spectator. In the same way, a mirror can define a space that opens onto another space and therefore another place where the theatrical-cinematographic performance unfolds. Thomas Brandlmeier calls the use of time in Manoel de Oliveira's cinema imperfect filmic and states that it should not be confused with flashback, since it is a past that has not ended and that appears mixed with the narrative of the present (Brandlmeier, 2013:19). Time in

Oliveira's cinema develops in a permanent interconnection between the past, the present and the future.

Oliveira's melodramas also feature dual elements in the form of active and passive narration as well as by means of movement together with stillness. In *Amor de Perdição* (Doomed Love, 1979), for example, there is a scene falling between still image and narration and between static and movement. According to Denis Lévy, in this film and many others made by Oliveira from the late 1960s onwards, there is a “gap between the character and the actor, the actor and the model, between the frame and the scene, between the scene and the world, between the image and the text” (1998, 53). In the film, the two lovers are imprisoned. Thereza is locked up in a convent and Simão is taken to prison after killing Thereza’s cousin. From that point on, they both become restrained and passive, fatally paralyzed by their destiny. Visually, they fade away, turning pale as if being gradually overcome by the stillness of death.

For authors such as Johnson, although they affirm and emphasize the relationship with the theatrical aspect of this work, in their analysis it is always subordinated to the work of literary adaptation, and in this sense in his work he highlights the relationship between the novel and the film, and how it slides from the melodramatic in the novel to a greater artistic complexity in the film (Johnson 2007, 36). The director made two slightly different versions of *Amor de Perdição* (Doomed Love, 1978), one for film and one for television. The latter was not a success: “the slow pace, the absence of close-ups, the theatrical framing, the acting style, and the use of *tableaux vivants*, made *Amor de Perdição* a difficult, if not impossible, sell for the small screen (Johnson 2007, 35). Recognition of this work would not come until it was shown in cinemas a year later.

In some scenes of *Amor de Perdição* (1978), *Francisca* (1981) or *Abraham’s Valley* (1993), the composition of the shots is fixed, hieratic, reminiscent of living paintings, and reminiscent of the paintings of Velázquez or Goya; the frequent use of *tableaux vivants* or living paintings is used by the filmmaker to represent the eternal stillness of death, in contrast to the narrative dynamics and movement of cinema. Contemporary cinema’s revival of this nineteenth-century form of entertainment, the *tableau vivant*, which was also used by the Spanish filmmaker Luis Buñuel in *Viridiana* (1961), is a relevant example of the author’s use of historical representation techniques, adapting them to contemporary melodramas. His use also makes reference to the visual and semantic games that he establishes with the spectator around riddles and symbolisms. Another example is the film *Abraham's Valley* (1993), which is an adaptation of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857). Here Oliveira uses the *tableau vivant* to achieve an interplay between visual statism and critique of a rigid bourgeois social order.

This idea of cinema as a concentrated dramatic form is reminiscent of one of the Portuguese director's great cinematic influences, Carl Theodor Dreyer. Throughout his work, and in films released across the decades like *La passion de Jeanne de Arcq* (1928), *Vampyr* (1932), *Ordet* (1954) and *Gertrud* (1964), Dreyer makes the editing effects, camera movements and shot angulation subordinate to the words and the power of the human face. In the film *Gertrud* (1964), there is a common stylistic device in which two

characters are in constant dialogue or, more specifically reciting text, using both frontal and sequence shots, and making use of static shots and tableau vivant. Dreyer uses a hybrid narrative form somewhere between cinema and theatre which, according to Manoel de Oliveira himself, enables the search for depth, for what lies within, for that which is inaccessible to humankind, and for which there is no answer: “Why do we live, why do we die? Christians and other religions may have answers. Books are written for that, are they not? But living is an act of enormous humility. We accept the pleasure and the pain, and we endure everything to the end without knowing why” (2001, 103).

Both Dreyer’s and Oliveira’s films delve into the characters’ inner selves and the entire filmic narrative is executed in terms of words, dialogue or the absence of it. The visual result is that the movement and stillness reflect that inner mood marked by the word and the composition. This influences all other aspects of the staging: script, editing, lighting and, camera movements. For Oliveira (2001, 102-103) Dreyer foresaw the future of cinema because he had the courage to film the word. Before him nobody dared, they said that the word was theatre. Life and death, stillness and movement as elements that function in a dual manner are other elements of their films that connect both directors, and which are very present in the Portuguese director’s dramas.

Manoel de Oliveira’s cinema contains poetic elements that are truly sublime. The intimate feelings of the characters are expressed through the most functional, naked image, with very measured dialogue and actors who bring their characters to life with great dramatic force and restrained emotionality: the faces, the looks, they say it all. As has already been mentioned, Manoel de Oliveira’s films rely on theatrical principles to create their *mise-en-scène*, as in the case of *Un Amor de Perdição* (1979) and *Francisca* (1981). In both adaptations of literary works, Oliveira builds the *mise-en-scène* on two levels: the stage and the trajectory of the word. It is an awareness that appears as a form of resistance to the way cinema typically assimilates, and it is produced in two stages. Firstly, it gradually absorbs the homogeneous materiality of the scene and then dissolves the theatrical word into a cinematographic regime in which, as a “contemporary primitive”, Oliveira manifests his resistance to classical montage by breaking with linearity, the dynamic mobility of the camera, and frontality. Returning to the theatre then becomes a way of reintroducing distance into what is shown, presented as a separate world. It is about establishing a confrontation with what is right there, the driving principle, although this does not imply that emotion is left out of this modified relationship.

The stage-awareness of Oliveira’s films is centred on a prohibition against breaking the fourth wall. Indeed, all the spaces shown are activated by the characters or are visible, but the space from which one observes, the place where the camera is located, is not the subject of a reverse shot that could suggest that the space being depicted extends towards the fourth wall. Another theatrical strategy used is that the actors look at and address the spectator, discovering the real space, breaking with the naturalistic narrative of cinema and suggesting to the audience that there is a reality beyond the screen, and that this is only a simulacrum.

Lavin names various forms of the presence of the word in Oliveira's work, such as the signs on the screen as in the silent film era, through the books and letters read by the characters; the director himself called his cinema a visual word (2008: 62). Oliveira films the conversations of his characters without cutting the conversation, thus recovering the theatrical listening device and maintaining its unity. From their position in the scene it is possible to see where they are speaking and from and from what distance. Between the words that one speaks and the other listens to, there is an impalpable aerial dimension that is not disrupted mechanically by the *mise-en-scène* during the editing phase. This idea also extends to the filming of his characters' monologues: "The voice is autonomous. It has a very strong value in my as much as the image. The voice or a moment of moment of action has the same value" (Manoel de Oliveira in Bæcque, Parsi, 1999, 87). Manoel de Oliveira believes in the game and in the lie that cinema is too, the screen is like a last mask, which returns all power, all authority to the word (Coelho, 2013: 89).

Oliveira, far from resorting to an image illustrating a story and a voice that the spectator hears, respects the theatrical nature of the monologue by keeping the camera on the character speaking, either to release the power of the imagery contained in the word without showing it, or to introduce doubt, a deception, to suggest that the speaker is lying, that they are not necessarily saying everything, far less the truth, without any corrective interference from the film's narrative, following the principle of theatre, as Manoel de Oliveira's own reflection suggests (1981, 13): "To film, I always need concrete objects, concrete things. I can photograph a face, but I cannot photograph a thought". As Liborio Términe (1992, 13) would say, it is all a matter of dramaturgy and staging, of cinema as mimesis or the art of storytelling and expressing feelings through characters who speak and act, that is, the activity that materially arranges the different elements of artistic interpretation into one whole: spatialization, harmonization, sensemaking, and directing actors. In this sense, Bergman's legacy is also omnipresent (as well as Dreyer's, as already noted), in the ceremony of framing or re-framing (*Autumn Sonata*, 1978), the abundant use of frontality that approaches the idea of *tableau* (*After the Rehearsal*, 1983), the idea of identity through theatrical performance (Liv Ullmann), or the narrative monologue (*Bibi Andersson*) of the embodied characters (*Persona*, 1966). In short, Oliveira introduces in the scene the true concrete origin of the word, the here and now of the actor's body that pronounces the words, by mechanizing the verbal dialogue with a cinematographic shot for each verbal utterance, so that the spectator feels the written dramatic text before any word is spoken, that is, another way of making theatre perceptible by rejecting the innate nature of the word, its living spontaneity.

According to Király (2014) Manoel de Oliveira's films have had a great impact on the philosophical thought regarding cinema and the moving images of Gilles Deleuze (1925-95). According to Deleuze, there is a principle of affinity between the two forms of thought expression, explored as a peculiar transversal project alongside pure philosophical enquiry. Deleuze mentioned the films of the Portuguese filmmaker as a source of inspiration, along with the work of Roberto Rossellini, Alain Resnais, and Jean-

Luc Godard, among others. For the French philosopher, cinema has the capacity to be pedagogical, as the screen itself is likened to a blank slate (Viegas, 2016).

In addition to the analysis of the film itself, a glance at the author's own historical and biographical context offers some clues about his tendency to include theatrical techniques in his cinematic narrative. As such, Manoel de Oliveira belongs to a generation that worked with both theatrical and cinematographic entertainment, while other later filmmakers had television and cinema itself as referents.

It is therefore logical that for the Portuguese filmmaker the limits of cinema are similar to those of theatre and in many of his films he places actors and action in well-defined physical spaces within the filmic image. This framing of the characters is particularly marked in films such as *I'm Going Home* (2001), a narrative canvas where Oliveira reflects on the act of playing a role and where theatre is omnipresent. At the beginning of the film, Oliveira takes pleasure in the framing, clearly emulating works of French poetic naturalism, particularly Jean Renoir (*The Golden Coach*, 1952), and depicting a reality of the theatre that is borne out by the rest of the film. Indeed, with this framing, Oliveira establishes the limits between the real and the symbolic, in short, the frontiers of fiction that concern the main character played by the actor Michel Piccoli: Valence (Piccoli) is on stage performing Ionescu's play in the (imagined) theatre while men wait in the wings for the play to end before telling him the terrible (real) news of his family's death. The Portuguese director, moreover, resolves this metafictional *mise-en-scène* in a very skillful way. The backstage is shown and a theatrical stage next to where the cinematographic action takes place is evident, where decrepitude and death are discussed, in a work evocative of the Shakespearean universe of *King Lear*, and with which he seeks to identify with the character Valence/Piccoli and his immediate circumstances. In this way, Oliveira extends the screen from the two-dimensional to the three-dimensional, in such a way that he sees theatre as a therapy in which he can complete his existence, living lives other than his own.

Once again, the aforementioned cases show that Oliveira's approach simultaneously embraces mannerism and aestheticism, long shots and still images, pictorial compositions and tableaux vivants, as ways of demonstrating that Western society seeks to retain time and seize the instant. This is an aesthetic defined by Agamben (1999, 69) as the fate of contemporary art in an era in which despite the limits and boundaries of artistic tradition, "man is no longer able to find, between past and future, the space of the present, and gets lost in the linear time of history". Film auteurs who favour the narrative and linear sense of their cinematic discourse thus have a so-called possessive spectator who seeks to understand, grasp, and internalise the story. By contrast, the cinematographic technique used in Manoel de Oliveira's films seems to be aimed to interact with another type of spectator: the pensive spectator, a point made by Raymond Bellour. This spectator would be impressed by a still image, absorbed in its nuances and meanings to the point of becoming a thoughtful and contemplative spectator (2002, 75-80).

Oliveira is very clear that when the actor began to inhabit cinema, theatre had already put a lot of thought into him. It is precisely for this reason that in *I'm Going Home* he plays with the confrontation between the character from the world of theatre (Gilbert Valence/Michel Piccoli) and the image-presence of John Crawford (John Malkovich). On the one hand, there is Michel Piccoli, an icon of European auteur cinema (Godard, Buñuel, Ferreri, Resnais, Demy or Sautet), and on the other, the brilliant John Malkovich, also an iconic example of the creative film actor par excellence, capable of starring in his own film (*Being John Malkovich*, Spike Jonze, 1999).

Oliveira creates a *mise-en-scène* in which he takes the camera on stage and zooms in on the characters, isolating them, and then switches perspective and the field against field of the two, offering the spectator the fictional possibility of "being" not only above the interior location/stage but also within the performance area. In this acting duel, the two characters play totally contrasting roles. Valence/Piccoli, who is of stocky build, soft-spoken and relaxed, while Crawford/Malkovich, who has a slender physique, speaks in a high-pitched, broken voice that suggests an agitated demeanour. The scene concludes with the theatrical man's "contamination", a clear statement of intent by Oliveira. Valence (Piccoli) emulates Crawford (Malkovich) with a nervous and fast-paced performance because he has only three days to play Mulligan's character in James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Off-camera, Piccoli's voice outlines the difficulties his character faces with Joyce's language, while the camera constantly frames Malkovich's face revealing his character's most minute gestures, as if it were a lesson in Bela Balázs' "pantomime": the raised eyebrows, quivering lips, fluttering eyes, intermittent short bursts of breath and, gestures of concentration all making Crawford/Malkovich's face a living breathing surface, where all the small sound accidents imposed by the text can be perceived in real time. In this way, Oliveira vindicates theatricality over the mere presence of the theatrical in his film: the theatre as a performance stage and a space for different transformations where the interpretation becomes both the subject and object of the *mise-en-scène* and is reconciled with the notion of cinema.

Manoel de Oliveira also seeks to give presence to the space behind the screen, sometimes giving it stage presence, or suggesting narratives and meanings to the viewer that occur in that space. It is also a way of playing with the dimensions of the theatre stage. And as in the theatre, Oliveira seems to be aware of both the narrative happening on the screen and the narrative occurring in the surrounding spaces. This theory of fictional confluence was highlighted by Anne and Joachim Paech (2002, 36) and is not alien to Manoel de Oliveira's work, as is the case in one of his major works, *The Letter*, an award-winning film at the 1999 Cannes Film Festival, an adaptation of the novel *La Princesse de Clèves* by Madame de la Fayette to contemporary Paris, where the object of Madame de Clèves' passion is a rock musician played by the actor and singer Pedro Abrunhosa. In this filmic-humanistic lesson from the Portuguese filmmaker, there are a few closing minutes with a fixed camera where Pedro Abrunhosa's character appeals to the raw emotion of the spectator.

According to Oliveira, the idea for this film dates back to the time when he was filming *Amor de Perdição* (1978), and takes up the idea of frustrated love, among other themes; it includes numerous medium shots as a theatrical resource, and the use of a low or very low camera angle, as if the scenes were being viewed from a theater seat. This shows the way in which Oliveira's filmmaking tends to distance itself from the possessive spectator, who is inclined to absorb and internalise the story univocally, to become part of the work as a reflective, contemplative, thinking and emotional spectator.

## **Conclusion**

The main conclusions of this work point to the fact that the Portuguese film director, Manoel de Oliveira, created profoundly intermedial work that is related to Greek tragedy, melodrama, painting, and the cinema of Bergman and Dreyer. Manoel de Oliveira's style is characterized by this commitment to the visibility of artifice and theatrical forms, giving priority throughout his work to significant elements such as the actor, words and light, with the aim of preserving and reinterpreting pure theatricality.

But above all, it is evident that in all his work he achieves a strange symbiosis between theatrical and cinematographic language, while also presenting himself as avant-garde and as an artist seriously concerned with the human condition. Oliveira has continued the evolution of the great masters of the silent era by progressing to the era of sound and, with it, reaches the peak of his artistic expression. Like Dreyer, Fritz Lang, Eisenstein, Renoir, or Mizoguchi, Oliveira has focused his attention on the continuity of gesture and human behaviour in the space of the frame and, as a consequence, in his films speech has acquired the central role that montage and camera movements held in silent films.

The singularity of Oliveira's work stems from these converging features. However, Oliveira is no less cinematographic than Griffith, but he also moves the spectator for precisely the same reasons: his artistic sense, the ability to capture human gestures, the art of visual composition, his direction of actors and his inventiveness, which always manages to surprise. In one key respect, however, he differs from film writers who advocate linear narrative movement and continuity in storytelling and that is in the conception of the story from the cinematographic dualities, a dialectic that intensely involves the spectator and forces them to reflect beyond merely following a spectacular story. In his films there is stillness and movement, such as frontal and sequence shots, or ultimately, death and life.

This is cinema as the embodiment of reality, created by and for filming in a kind of extreme formulation, on a par with Godard's most radical theories and André Bazin's filmic theories, and always approached with the paradoxical rigor of a Dreyer, placed deliberately on the margins of the contemporary cinematography canon.

Manoel de Oliveira explores the nature of cinematic language and often extends or strains it towards aspects that go beyond the narrative style of commercial cinema. Among these aspects, slow pacing, fixed framing, the value of the word and theatrical resources have been highlighted.

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