

RITA, HER PILGRIMES

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Sam Warren Miell

On an October evening in 1797, in a lonely farm house on the Exmoor confines, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, dosed on “two grains of Opium taken to check a dysentery,” dozed off while reading about the Mongol emperor Kubla Khan in the fourth volume of *Purchas his Pilgrimes: contayning a history of the world, in sea voyages, & lande-trauells by Englishmen and others*. In the reverie that ensued, he dreamed three hundred lines of a poem. On waking, he quickly began to transcribe it, but was interrupted after a few dozen lines by the visit of a “person on business from Porlock.” By the time he returned to his room, he found that the rest of the poem had slipped from his mind into the oblivion that lies in wait for unconsummated inspiration. The fragment would lie dormant for almost twenty years, until Coleridge read it to Lord Byron, who persuaded him to publish it.

In 2007, Rita Azevedo Gomes received a bad medical prognosis. She decided to go on a trip to Greece, a place she'd always intended but had never managed to visit. Twelve years later, over lunch, she told the poet João Miguel Fernandes Jorge about her journey. After a few months, he came to the Cinemateca Portuguesa, where Rita worked, with a short story called 'A Portuguesa.' Seemingly named after her 2019 film (itself an adaptation of a short story by Robert Musil called *Die Portugiesin*), it was in fact a fictionalisation of that trip to Greece more than a decade earlier. Receiving this gift, she found herself, in her own words, “in a border zone, travelling along the uncertain line between reality and dream.”

Five years later, Rita was once again in Greece, this time with a small band of comrades: four young men and a young woman. They were making a film about that story. But it would also, and even moreso, be a film about their own adventure, retracing the steps of a journey narrated in the reverie of a writer transmuting the sea voyages and land travels of another, one who had survived a death sentence to return to this place where she had in the meantime become a character in the infinite suspension of fiction. Their experiences would be set off by poems they would read to each other: the Greek of Cavafy, inheritor of the weightiest of all poetic traditions, the English of Byron and Keats, who so revered the Hellenic omphalos of a culture that was for them a bulwark against the ugliness of their time, and the Portuguese of – of course – João Miguel Fernandes Jorge, *passer métaphysique* across reality and its metamorphoses. And between poems recited and monuments of a history too vast to fathom, “a constant sharing – of rooms, tables, cooking, the washing line, suitcases, and equipment – but above all, of an exhausting joy.”

Those who have attended a few screenings in this retrospective, or who have seen Rita Azevedo Gomes's films before, may well have noticed a kind of contradiction that runs through them. On the one hand, there is the extreme attention to detail, a plastic supremacy across decor, costumes, lighting and choreography that reaches an apogee in the exquisite sequence shots of *A Woman's Revenge* and *The Portuguese Woman*. In the cinema, we hold our breath; replaying these scenes before the analytic eye, we are taken aback by the care and craft. On the other hand, there is everything that moves in the opposite direction to this total control. The love of working with animals, the ventilation of unmarked time in the company of friends, as in

Correspondences and *Danses Macabres...*, the mischievous exposure, again and again, of the playacting and makebelieve behind the whole cinematic art, and above all the constant fidelity to that feeling that tells you that what you have encountered by the grace of chance – this poem, this story, this painting, this light – must find its way into the work. The belief that, as João Bénard da Costa says in Rita's very first film, “Chances are the only things that don't happen by chance.” So that films of a mastery and intention rare in today's cinema are also aleatory assemblages, deposits of the glistening silt of the art life, happy Frankenstein's monsters brandishing their bolts and stitches.

Of course, this may just be a particularly overt example of a contradiction that animates all worthwhile art: order vs chaos, logic vs instinct, reason vs emotion. Amid the columns and statues of Greek antiquity as we are in *Fuck The Polis*, we might invoke the eternal opposition between the Apollonian and the Dionysian. Yet such grand concepts, with their capital letters as imposing as the capitals of those Doric columns, are the materials of their own polis which, like a state, rejects or marginalises what it cannot assimilate to its own categories. But when the sun suddenly emerges from the clouds as Loukianos Moshonas delivers a poem by Cavafy, setting ablaze the red of the poppies before him; when Bingham Bryant misreads Byron's “vulgar mould” as “vulgar mound,” calling to mind the Mykonos we see burdened by overtourism, unimaginable in the poet's day; when Rita Azevedo Gomes buys a ticket to Athens in 2007 and arrives to find Maria Farantouri singing in the amphitheatre, whom she will meet again in 2024, who will once again protect her from the desolation she feels – what concepts correspond to these moments? It is no longer a question of tidy divisions, of cabinets into which we can file each scrap of experience, of tables for sorting the materials of art, but rather of allowing what simply transpires to take its own place in the quiet unfolding of its self-being. It seems to me that for Rita, form, whether it manifests as a scrupulously rehearsed scene or a shot taken on a phone in the heat of the moment, is the tribute art pays to the enigma of existence.

In fact, at one time, a poet did try to give a name to this. In one of the most beautiful letters in the English language, Keats defines ‘Negative Capability’ as that phenomenon by which “a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” And he goes on: “Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetratum of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge.” Coleridge, who spent his life trying to assemble his wayward ideas into a sturdy metaphysical polis that could encompass all the constituents of the universe; whose finest poetry came in moments of trance, dejection, and perplexity that in his own words “make a toy of thought”; who for years kept buried a jewel rescued from the world of dreams out of fear it was a mere trifle of fancy – I thought of this poet as I heard the words of his colleagues in *Fuck The Polis*. I thought of what it takes to lend your ear to what you see and feel but don't yet and may never understand, both inside of you and out there in the world, and what it takes, further still, to present it to that world as a work of art. As we are ever more the victims of total administration, and as everything is crushed into the narrow confines of spreadsheet cells, I find that the odyssey that matters now cannot be the one that turns hundreds of millions of pounds into huge, ugly, oppressive images. It must be one like this, in which some friends share company on boats and in cars, share gazes as

they look upon the fabric of the past and the present, share words as they sit among grasses and flowers, and finally share all of this with us, forsaking jealous ownership, letting what was theirs pass into the same sky that vaulted above the temples of the ancients and into this dark room that acts as ours – for, as another bard once wrote, when a song's on the wind, it belongs to the air.

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