

***The Invisible Life of Eurídice Gusmão* (*A vida invisível*, 2019)**

Oliver Fahle

dir. Karim Aïnouz; prod. Rodrigo Teixeira, Michael Weber, Viola Fügen; screenplay Murilo Hauser, Inés Bortagaray, Karim Aïnouz; photography Hélène Louvart; music Benedikt Schiefer. DCP, color, 139 mins. Canal Brasil, RT Features et al., distrib. Vitrine Films, The Match Factory.

The opening images of *A vida invisível* are sensual: moss on rocks, a water spring clearing a path in the ground, precipitation in a rainforest of great greenery. The subsequent shots show the sea and two young women, gazing yearningly over the infinite water. We are in Rio de Janeiro in 1950, where the tropical green of the Mata Atlântica (Atlantic Forest) merges with the rocky seaside. In the next shot, two sisters, Guida (played by Júlia Stockler) and Eurídice (played by Carol Duarte), are on their way home through the forest, where they encounter small apes and tropical wilderness as they reflect on their inner restlessness. The camera catches a glimpse of the mighty Corcovado Mountain, with the statue of Christ erected on its summit. This statue manifests both the Catholic and patriarchal basis of Brazilian society, and is also an expression of transcendence and awakening. Suddenly the camera zooms close to the face of Eurídice, who follows Guida and looks for her sister. Reminiscent of the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurídice, the danger of losing contact with the beloved is evoked. In an inner monologue anticipating the future, Eurídice speaks to her sister, asserting that she had let her go away only because Guida wanted her to. Rather than letting her go, however, Eurídice should have locked her in a room and swallowed the key. While she is uttering these words, the camera reveals the sky over Corcovado, draped in clouds. It changes color and a deep red fills the screen.

The narrative of the film—based on Martha Batalha's less melodramatic 2016 novel, *A vida invisível de Eurídice Gusmão*—centers on the separation of these closely connected



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

sisters. Guida, the older and more adventurous one, falls in love with Yorgos (played by Nikolas Antunes), a young Greek man, and impulsively follows him to Greece without saying goodbye to her family. Eurídice, a passionate piano player, is shocked. Some months later she marries Antenor (played by Grégoorio Duvivier), who is a decent husband but who struggles to understand Eurídice's devotion to music. While Eurídice rehearses for the Vienna Conservatory, where she intends to study, Guida returns from Greece, pregnant and separated from her unfaithful lover. Unable to accept the disgrace, her father, Manuel (played by António Fonseca), kicks her out of their home. The parents lie to Guida, pretending that Eurídice is in Vienna, though in fact she lives close by in Rio. Guida finds a job and comes to accept the baby whom she initially rejected. She writes letter after letter to Eurídice, hoping her mother will forward them to her sister in Vienna. In turn, Eurídice hires a private detective to trace down Guida. Yet, all her efforts are in vain. In one scene, the sisters come into close proximity in a restaurant, but miss each other—a famous »if only« scene, characteristic of classical melodrama (Neale 165). The sisters remain separated for the rest of their lives. Although Eurídice finds out her parents lied to her, she mistakenly assumes that her sister is dead. Sixty years later: Eurídice, now an old lady (played by the famous Brazilian actress Fernanda Montenegro), discovers the letters from Guida, which her now-deceased husband Antenor had kept from her. Searching for her sister, she finds only Guida's grandchild (played by Júlia Stockler, who also plays young Guida). The film ends as it began: Eurídice speaks with her sister in an inner monologue confessing that she has never loved a person as deeply as her.

The tropical green is one component of the vibrant coloring in *A vida invisível*. Colors form part of the »mode of excess« (Brooks 1976) of melodrama and have stood for reflexive use since the films of Douglas Sirk and Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Color often reflects an exaggerated expression of non-realized emotions of the protagonists. Thus, melodramatic *mise-en-scène* alludes not only to the inner life of the protagonists but also to the non-expressible, the power of affect (Deleuze 143). Affect detaches from the protagonists, filling the whole screen and creating another realm of virtual and de-subjectified power. Director Ainouz juxtaposes the expressive work of color with moments of silence and voicelessness. When Guida goes dancing with Yorgos, for example, red color filters the visual space of the dance room. The couple stop dancing and merely look at each other without a word. Through such nearly motionless shots, which reinforce the intensity of liveliness, a sense grows for Guida's spontaneous and fateful decision to leave everything behind. This kind of intensity, which disregards chronological order and expresses affect, is part of an aesthetic approach that transcends classical melodrama.

Thomas Elsaesser emphasizes the importance of sound and music in classical melodrama: »Sound, whether musical or verbal, acts first of all to give the illusion of depth of the moving picture and by helping to create the third dimension of the spectacle, dialogue becomes a scenic element, along with more directly visual means of the *mise-en-scène*« (76). Even when music plays an essential role in Ainouz's film, silence remains crucial as well. In another scene, Antenor and Eurídice are shown arguing in expectation of their first baby. Eurídice is unhappy with the pregnancy and is deeply preoccupied with her sister's lost trace. Antenor, tired of Eurídice's mental absence in the midst of their own family dilemma, shouts at her that »Guida is dead.« Eurídice reacts with a furious, almost ferocious, look, shown in a close-up that captures her face

from the side rather than the front. The look detaches itself from the situation. The enraged, even distorted, face is an »affect-image« (Deleuze 123) that no longer marks a person or object, but rather stands for a specific cinematic quality.

Throughout the film, it seems that deep reds represent the color of passion, whereas blue is the color of patriarchy. The latter is the dominant color in the couple's living room, for instance, where even the curtains are blue. They symbolize the threshold to the outside world, dominated by traditional rules of male authority. The famous mirror and window motifs, characteristic of classical melodrama (Weber 103), are also included in the film through Eurídice's colorful visions of the outside world. The most ambiguous colors are yellow and green. When Antenor wants to paint the room of the unborn and, in his opinion male, baby, Eurídice makes the proposal to paint it yellow. Yellow and green are the colors of Guida's house, itself (a microcosm of) a matriarchal universe. Green and yellow are also predominant in the Atlantic Forest, in the meeting between Guida and Yorgos and in the imaginary encounters between Eurídice and Guida when Eurídice auditions at the conservatory in Rio de Janeiro. The deeper and saturated orange, a mixture of yellow and red, alludes to a world of dreams and imagination. However, these imaginations are not just fantasies of a lost world. On the contrary, they become tangible and alive through the separation of Eurídice and Guida. The imagined bond between them corresponds with a more materialist expression, because it refers to the *mise-en-scène* of the body and forges a genuine female gaze. A striking paradox of *A vida invisível* is the prominence of women in contrast to the relative absence of men. Patriarchy is powerful, but the *mise-en-scène*, following the two sisters' paths, is centered on the women. We learn much about their lives, their hopes and passions, their suffering and pain, their resistance and the imaginary (inter)connections between them, even when they lack physical contact. One of the prevailing male characters is their father, Manuel, whom the sisters call only »the Portuguese« in recognition of his belonging to Brazil's colonial past, a world long gone. Still, the father is responsible for their lifelong separation. When he finally confesses his lies to Eurídice, she strikes him. As he offers no resistance, he becomes increasingly weak. Antenor, Eurídice's husband, is the most present male figure. He dreams of a heteronormative bourgeois family with a housewife and children, and he cannot understand Eurídice's desire to become a professional piano player. According to the norms of patriarchal society, the passions of women should remain concealed unless they cater to the desires of men. Yet the film actualizes the contrary. It not only envisions the powerful inner life of women (and cinema), but it stresses the meaning of their bodies as individual and social actors.

Classical melodrama draws attention to the inner life of the protagonists, and, according to Linda Williams, as body genre it provokes corporal reactions of the spectator. Yet the melodrama rarely exposes the body in such visual and sensual ways like it does in *A vida invisível*. The unintended pregnancies of Guida and Eurídice are the most obvious signs of the conflict that marks their lives. Guida loses her home, Eurídice her career. While there are few scenes in which the sisters are close together, these moments are all the more intimate. For instance, there is the moment when Guida describes the intimacy between her and Yorgos, as she recounts how he performed cunnilingus on her and how she touched his penis. This storytelling of a lustful encounter serves as a contrast to the beginning of Eurídice's wedding. She is in the bathroom, sitting on a toilet, contemplating with a relative the married life that awaits her. Although sex

scenes with Antenor involve some desire, they cannot measure up to Eurídice's passion for the piano. In the scene in which she gets pregnant, for instance, Antenor persuades her to have sex. In the background of the shot, we see them sleeping with each other on the sofa, half hidden by the piano. Since she did not fully consent to the sexual act, the scene is clouded with the sexual violence often condoned in marriage.

The birth of Guida's son is depicted as a stressful experience for her. Guida wants to ignore it and goes straight to a bar where a man kissing her notices milk on her breast. She must acknowledge that motherhood interferes with her desire to have sex. Both women eventually acquiesce to their situations, but there is no reconciliation between femininity and motherhood, only fragile agreements and a tenuous »truce.« There remains conflict between, on the one hand, women's autonomy and sexual desire, and, on the other hand, social norms of how women, and especially mothers, ought to behave. This conflict continues into our own contemporary society as shown in the political developments in 2020s Brazil with President Jair Bolsonaro, who has publicly voiced a misogynist attitude. Moreover, it demonstrates that melodrama in *A vida invisível* relates not only to heterosexual love, but that the genre can today be concerned, too, with diversity. In this case, sisterly love outdoes all other forms—in particular, the unfulfilled love between man and woman. Eurídice burns her piano when she is told her sister is dead. Her passion for music is inexorably linked to her sister. A universal issue of the film, therefore, is that love is all about where and whom you love, and that this can be far removed from heteronormative binaries.

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