The Death of Tragedy: *Pathosformel* and the Melodramatic Imagination

DANIEL RIBAS

> The mechanism of timely remorse or redemption through love — the arch-Wagnerian theme — allows the romantic hero to partake of the excitement of evil without bearing the real cost. It carries the audience of the brink of terror only to snatch them away at the last moment into the light of forgiveness. "Near-tragedy" is, in fact, another word for melodrama.
>
> STEINER, 1995, p. 133.

Introduction

Looking at a work like *Pathosformel* (2020), by Vasco Araújo, we cannot fail to notice the way that, by evoking millennia-old references of dramaturgical tradition, the artist proposes a reassessment of this same tradition. The different sequences in this film rhyme with one another, showing a world where our emotions are constantly challenged, with a cynical cacophony of voices that explore the relationships between the characters. And these characters are always shown as archetypes of another dramaturgical order — stemming from our foundational myths — which, in this work, has entirely lost its purifying aura, just as tragedy promised in its rather more glorious days.

In a metaphor that is made almost explicitly clear, the narrative of *Pathosformel* is divided into chapters, promising a dramatic progression that is far from (intentionally) being achieved. Perhaps that is why the film includes staged moments that we could call the "making of" the project: there, cacophonous voices, whispering in English — the "universal" *newspeak* — continually intertwine in a kind of continuum over the more basic — and yet necessary — words of distrust, conflict and rumour about love. These moments — which punctuate the film at several points — show the *false* and technical side of cinema, at the same time as filming, with extraordinary delicacy, a man's transformation into a statue: voices that ruminate among themselves contrast with the crystallisation of a human body in the form of plaster.

There is no question that *Pathosformel* — and we can tell this from the title — evokes a clear tradition: one that comes from tragedy and passes into modern times, to melodrama. In our reading of the film and the world-view it proposes, Vasco Araújo makes a compendium of a melodramatic mode, albeit one that is disguised by its obvious references to even older traditions. For us, and we will argue this in the text, this dramatic game is the clearest sign that we are *lost* in this world of extreme emotions and quick connections.

The melodramatic imagination

In one of the most influential books in terms of reassessing the dramaturgical modes of our modern age — *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and*

the Mode of Excess (originally published in 1976) — Peter Brooks gives a compelling explanation of how literature and theatre (and later cinema) opened up to a "melodramatic imagination." For Brooks:

> The desire to express all seems a fundamental characteristic of the melodramatic mode. Nothing is spared because nothing is left unsaid; the characters stand on stage and utter the unspeakable, give voice to their deepest feelings, dramatize through their heightened and polarized words and gestures the whole lesson of their relationship. They assume primary psychic roles […] and express basic psychic conditions. Life tends, in this fiction, toward ever more concentrated and totally expressive gestures and statements. (Brooks, 1991, pp. 52-53)

Brooks proposes a reassessment of melodramatic production through a crossing of dramatic models, placing it within a deeper historical context: "melodrama does not simply represent a 'fall' from tragedy, but a response to the loss of the tragic vision. It comes into being in a world where the traditional imperatives of truth and ethics have been violently thrown into question" (Brooks, 1991, p. 60).

The historical contextualisation of the emergence and consolidation of the melodramatic mode takes place through the need for dramaturgical models to adapt to new modes of living. With the acceleration promoted by the Industrial Revolution and the systematisation of capitalism as an organisation of society, human relationships reconfigured. Matthew Buckley highlights this when he notes that melodrama is "nothing more (or less) than the inevitable concentration and distillation of traditional narrative form in response to the intensification and acceleration of modes of existence and structures of consciousness over time" (Buckley, 2018, pp. 28-29).

As such, melodrama — as it developed in theatre, literature, classic American cinema (cf. Gledhill, 1987; Gledhill & Williams, 2018; Landy, 1991; Williams, 1998), and later in its cultural modulations over the decades that followed, especially in the European space — is presented as a dramatic model of excess, developed from an "intensified symbolisation of everyday actions, the heightening of the ordinary gesture and the use of setting and décor so as to reflect the characters' fetishist fixations" (Elsaesser, 1987, p. 56). Above all, this melodramatic mode represents, in its essential construction, a model of excess, centred on social organisation based on patriarchal power. Melodrama studies the forms of power within the most intimate relationships, allowing for criticism and exposure of those power structures through a dramatic intensification combined with a suffocating claustrophobia: melodrama is constructed as an extreme dramaturgical model that will implode through violence.

The idea of claustrophobia also relates to the energy of the *mise-en-scène*, a truly symbolic sign of melodrama and its peculiar and delicate relationship with everyday gestures and objects: they hold a latent metaphorical power in melodramatic characters — always on the verge of exploding, crying or killing. The melodramatic *mise-en-scène* is always a place of illusion: where everything seems to be right; the place where all social structures and their basic requirements of respectability belong. Melodrama assumes this illusory cloak of the real to later reveal the deeper vio-

lence inherent in human relationships and the powers entrenched in them. Melodrama continually wears a cloak of true repression (sexual, social, family-related, etc.) but then cannot tolerate the pressure of the illusion of the real. This closure makes the characters erupt. In short, it is a constant dialectic between an intense claustrophobia of the world, but also a repressed energy that abruptly comes to the surface in the characters. As Thomas Elsaesser astutely notes (1987, p. 67):

> the true *pathos* [of classical melodrama] is the very mediocrity of the human beings involved, putting such high demands upon themselves, trying to live up to an exalted vision of man, but instead living out the impossible contradictions that have turned the American dream into its proverbial nightmare.

The melodramatic imagination thus accentuates diverse dramatic and cinematographic characteristics, which allow us to observe their historical time and the social pressures that mark our common existence. Melodrama and its emotional intensifications make clear the dilemmas and contradictions of human relationships, the structures of power and of violent emotional charge with which we are obliged to live.

The melodrama in *Pathosformel*

Vasco Araújo and his film condense this melodramatic imagination, placing it in play with the archetypical symbols of what would previously have been tragedy. There is, in this sense, a constant dialectic in which the artist uses these canonised models to reveal that, inside, there is nothing left but an egotistical struggle and a kind of human resentment. The gods are transformed into mere chess pieces on an empty staging. This is why existential dilemmas never result in the sublimation of the human being and, consequently, in the non-existence of a *pathos* that elevates the presence of humankind. On the contrary, we are placed in the middle of nothing more than a spiteful intrigue.

For Steiner, tragedy "in the radical sense is the dramatic representation or, more precisely, the dramatic testing of a view of reality in which man is taken to be an unwelcome guest in the world" (Steiner, 1995, p. xi). For the philosopher, this strangeness stems from an inevitability of human nature. In *Pathosformel*, Vasco Araújo establishes a series of links with these classical traditions, whether by evoking Greek myths such as "Prometheus Bound" or "Narcissus," or with the constant idea of the presence of a chorus — precisely the sequences of "cinema technicians" we mentioned, who speak during the shooting of a film; or even the torn figures from posters stuck to the walls of the set.

These sequences, derived from tragic models, now appear in a kitsch way, in a kind of palimpsest that confuses the viewer with a deceptively tragic dimension and a nature that is merely an instrument of the cinematographic and dramaturgical device. Prometheus is a lonely man who speaks to camera; the Greek goddesses (Aphrodite and Persephone) chat in bed, unable to overcome a certain vulgarity in their dialogue, allowing them to launch into never-ending mutual and childish demands: "shut up!" The start of the film, with a voice-over in Italian, over a still life, tells us:

> At the heart of it all is a crisis, a rupture, a dissonance. The false certainties and comfortable rapprochements have crumbled away. Yet this collapse foreshadows a radical "experience" in which nothing — not even an unhappy ending, can be taken for granted. The emphasis is not on the result, but on the process, the experience. Everything presents itself, first and foremost, as a risk. Every era sees the renaissance of the past that it deserves, and humanity has always had a strain of constructive schizophrenia.

With this beginning and the way this "schizophrenia" is used throughout the narrative, Vasco Araújo gives a sense of a kind of *lightness of being*, which disarms us in a contemporary time when desire must be materialised as quickly as possible. The melodramatic imagination inferred here is one that also produces this modernity of late capitalism. A modernity in which everything flows over our senses. What remains: nothing more than the worn down posters, half torn, unstuck, loose, faded as if they composed a wall of shows that have been and gone, now out of fashion. The historical present of *Pathosformel* shows us the remains of the ruins of the tragic, of the exaltation and questioning of humankind. We are left with some traces of tragic thought, which successively, in each of the episodes, attempt to look at us. But they achieve nothing. It is all pure staging now. Melodrama.

In his description of this liquid world, Zygmunt Bauman looks at time from a new perspective, a time that is now another:

> "Instantaneity" means immediate, "on-the-spot" fulfilment — but also immediate exhaustion and fading of interest. Time-distance separating the end from the beginning is shrinking or vanishing altogether; the two notions, which were once used to plot the passing, and so to calculate the "forfeited value", of time, have lost much of their meaning, which — as all meanings — arose from the starkness of their opposition. There are only "moments" — points without dimensions. (Bauman, 2000, p. 118)

The chapter structure and the constant redundancy of choral moments — the whispering cinema technicians and the verbose wall posters — in fact demonstrate this instantaneous "atemporality" and the emotional lightness of a man. They are snapshots of a world in constant ambivalence: where we lose an emotional link, which is constantly called into question.

In chapter I, on a clear white set, Vasco Araújo shows us a dead body. The voice explains: "To cease to be loved is to become invisible." Throughout the diverse "scenes" the artist shows us in subsequent chapters — and apart from the choral elements mentioned above — it is the same theme that reappears: man and his body facing a humanity he doesn't understand. Whether it is the man who, bound in chains, speaks about his condition; or the man who ineffectually pulls what seems to be a bag containing a dead body, in the midst of an atypical natural landscape (chapter IV); or the man who questions himself in the middle of a wall of mirrors (chapter VI).

These reflective dimensions culminate in chapter V, where they emerge impetuously, with a man fallen to the ground, a knife in a hand, and a woman dressed in white, soiled with blood. There is something passionate

about this chapter, evoking the violent and excessive nature of the melodramatic imagination, but also something of a theatricalisation of the narrative. And it is in this context that Vasco Araújo's film is melodramatically imagined, building a visual *mise-en-scène*, where the falsity of the studio is superimposed on the reality outside. That falsity, almost always composed of panels with worn and torn posters, necessarily calls on a symbolic dimension of this illusory scenery, made for a moment and now lost. Significantly, the posters are mostly torn across the eyes of the human figures shown there. It is as though we are denying the power of existence: we no longer see, we no longer exist. Only the laughter or inconsequential jokes remain. A tragic chorus that is no longer tragic, merely mundane, melodramatic.

Conclusion

Pathosformel, a title referring to Aby Warburg's research into visual imaginary worlds with an emotional charge, is a film placed in a limbo: that of looking at a humanity in a state of loss. Its melodramatic tone — so evident in its over-the-top soundtrack — functions just as Thomas Elsaesser (1987, p. 56) suggested: "Melodrama confers on them a negative identity through suffering, and the progressive self-immolation and disillusionment generally ends in resignation: they emerge as lesser human beings for having become wise and acquiescent to the ways of the world." This corrosive side of "knowledge" is what most destroys us as melodramatic human beings.

In the final episode, under the remains of classical statues, a voice tells us — as if summarising the argument of the film — in a whisper:

> I realise that the human being has a need for solace that cannot be satisfied. It's impossible to know when twilight will fall. Impossible to list all of the cases in which solace will become necessary. Life is not a problem that can be resolved by apportioning light to darkness or the days to the nights, but rather an unpredictable journey between places that don't exist.

This journey ends with a "solar" shot of a figure deluged by the sea, swallowed by the tide. All that's left to save the film is the music. But the man who is there will inevitably drown in his own sorrows.