

‘Um mecanismo simples mas delicado’: Figure, Technics, Trace in Manuel Gusmão’s *Pequeno Tratado das Figuras*

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Abstract: Manuel Gusmão’s poetry distinguishes itself by an incessant and rigorous questioning of the nature of poetry, the power of language and of images, both verbal and other, to construct, evoke and annul reality. His most recent book, *Pequeno Tratado das Figuras* (2013) is a complex and probing investigation into those topics as well as to the relationship between poetry and cinema, poetry and drawing, between different sign codes and grammars and between nature and technology. Taking recourse to theoretical problematizations of technology in Martin Heidegger and Walter Benjamin, as well as to reflection on the poetry of Gusmão by Rosa Martelo, this essay seeks to start probing some key aspects of Gusmão’s poetry and his use of images, centred on the concept of “figura”.

Keywords: Manuel Gusmão, Martin Heidegger, Walter Benjamin, Figura, Technology

Resumo: A poesia de Manuel Gusmão oferece uma reflexão rigorosa e incessante da natureza da poesia, do poder das palavras e das imagens, tanto verbais como outras, para construir, evocar e anular a realidade. O seu livro mais recente, *Pequeno Tratado das Figuras* (2013), é como uma investigação complexa e penetrante desses tópicos, assim como das relações entre cinema e poesia, poesia e desenho, entre diferentes gramáticas e códigos semânticos, entre a natureza e a tecnologia. Apoiando-se nas abordagens teóricas à questão da tecnologia de Martin Heidegger e Walter Benjamin, assim como no estudo de Rosa Martelo sobre a poesia de Manuel Gusmão, este ensaio tenta iniciar uma reflexão sobre pontos chave da poesia de Manuel Gusmão e do seu uso de imagens, começando pelo conceito de "figura".

Palavras-Chave: Manuel Gusmão, Martin Heidegger, Walter Benjamin, Figura, Tecnologia

Walter Benjamin starts his eighth thesis on the concept of History thus: “Die Tradition der Unterdrückten belehrt uns darüber, daß der ‘Ausnahmestand’, in dem wir leben, die Regel ist” (Benjamin 1977: 254) [“The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule”] (Benjamin 1970: 257). Even if the particular circumstances of Benjamin’s writing no longer apply, or not in the same way, after all 2013 is not 1940, there is a similar urgency today to rethink and revisit certain axioms we have come to take too much for granted. One of these would be the seemingly clear separation between technology and nature. Another would be the equally spurious supposed estrangement between poetry and politics, or between poetry and society. On the one hand, the continuous advance of, and dependency on, technology, instead of revealing its enmeshment with nature, has led to either a privileging of technology and the artificial over the natural or organic, or to a nostalgic hankering to a more natural past that never was; on the other hand, in a present in which the notion of crisis has come to be viewed as permanent, it is one of the functions of poetry to expose, question and contest the ever growing manipulation of reality and of language, indeed the manipulation and perversion of language, to impose oppression and exact submission into a condition of precariousness that mines the very essence of a democratic polity. The poetry of Manuel Gusmão has consistently sought to draw bridges between nature and technology, and to drive a message of liberty, beauty, and power that draws on tradition and revises it. It is a poetry that must be understood as political inasmuch as it resists the obfuscation of the present times and continuously seeks to think and give expression to sensations in a way that Rosa Martelo, drawing on words of Gusmão himself, has aptly classified as being a form of reason with passion. His most recent book of poetry, *Pequeno Tratado das Figuras* continues in the same vein and makes more than explicit how language can be deployed to let us see more in a constant questioning of the senses and of memory that both uses ekphrasis and moves beyond it to the point at which it does not matter whether the poem describes an object of art or whether it imagines it in its language. It is also a book that leads readers to consider anew the relationship between nature and technology, between the organic and the technic, between the real and the figurative. Its poems are both evocations of technology and

technique, the cinema, photography, drawing, and mechanisms to allow us to see further. Instead of opposing nature to technology or poetry to the technical, Gusmão strives for a symbiosis of the two through a series of figures and images that relate past sensation to present and future thought through memory and an emphasis on traces, both the literal ones on paper as well as those we can only imagine virtually left in our consciousness by the reading of the poems.

One of the most widely cited, if debatable, reflections on the nature of technology is Martin Heidegger's 1953 lecture on "The Question Concerning Technology". For his critics, Heidegger would be a conservative whose fear of the radical changes brought about by the use of technology in the modern world constituted above all a danger, especially in the way in which modern technology transformed nature and instrumentalized humans. For his adepts, however, Heidegger's radical questioning of the essence of technology and his tracing back of its original meanings was a necessary step to allow for a possibility of using technology rationally and not simply believe in it as a sort of destiny. From my perspective there are certainly valid reasons to credit both stands. On the one hand, Heidegger's essay performs one of the most thorough inquiries into the nature of technology, its essence as he put it; on the other hand, one must recognize that ultimately, in his privileging of an archaic sense of technology, and a linkage of such a meaning of technology with Being, Heidegger does not offer any possible way into accepting how inseparable technology has become from all that we consider human. Inasmuch as Heidegger goes back and traces a genealogy of the concept of technology that renders it, in its origins, akin to artistic creation, there is an important lesson to be taken in avoiding the common dichotomy between art and technology, or science and the humanities. Writing the Foreword to a collection of essays on *The Technological Imagination* in 1980 Teresa de Lauretis, Andreas Huyssen and Kathleen Woodward were very clear on the prevalence of such a split and its link with capitalist society: "All too often technology and the imagination have been considered mutually exclusive, or at least incommensurable spheres of social endeavour. This (...) has powerful roots in the history of Western Civilisation and in the structure of capitalist society (...)" (1980: viii). In his poetry Manuel Gusmão, though clearly aware of the difficulty of the task, continuously strives to unite both technology and the imagination, and one could, without

doing violence to the poems, refer to them as paradigmatic of a technological form of imagination inasmuch as they combine the natural with the technical and in doing so strive to naturalize the technological. One simple example of this is the seventh stanza of a poem titled “Arbustos” (“Shrubbery”):

A hélice cortando
centrífuga os ares
decapitou a boneca turca
que caiu das mãos do poeta
e rodando
e girando
em sentido contrário
produziu as nuvens vermelhas
e os cavalos extintos que
por dentro delas correm (Gusmão 2013: 16-17)

If the propeller acts as a destructive blade, even a murderous blade, decapitating the Turkish doll, it also gives rise to the red clouds and the horses running inside them, so that one cannot simply regard the propeller-blade as a symbol of technology’s destructive force but must also recognize its creative abilities and its role in the imagination. Furthermore, this scene in which the poet is reduced to the function of spectator or witness, from whose hands the doll falls, as part of a larger poem entitled shrubbery, also contributes to the impossibility of separating neatly between the natural and the technological. In a sense, what Gusmão does is revisit Heidegger’s questioning of technology, linking it indeed with a notion of art and with Being, but without succumbing to a fear of even its destructive power.

The importance that cinema assumes in the poetry of Gusmão is evident in this latest collection and the titles of two of its main sections leave no room for doubts: “No labirinto das imagens – o que falta para serem um filme?” and “Filmar o vento”. In *O Cinema da Poesia* Rosa Maria Martelo has analysed, more extensively than anyone else, the profound relationship between modern poetry and cinema in general, theoretical, terms, but also in direct and specific reference to the poetry of Manuel Gusmão. At one point she notes: “A poesia de Manuel Gusmão não aspira a um olhar inocente ou despojado sobre o mundo”

(245). In her analysis the poetry of Gusmão would thus use and deploy two strategies of seeing and saying, creating a series of “evanescent images” and at the same time the reference to photographic and filmic representation would entail a “técnica do olhar” (“technic of the gaze”, 245), that would allow for a Benjaminian privileging of History’s importance for the future, though without its messianic aspects. Such an observation is crucial to understand how Gusmão’s poetry establishes a direct relationship between art and technology that does not limit itself to the descriptive or ekphrastic. Rosa Maria Martelo’s claim throughout her study that what is important in the relation between poetry and cinema is not the ability for each to mutually influence the other at a thematic level, can be explicitly seen in the poetry of Manuel Gusmão. It is the ability to write poetry as if it too were a form of cinema, that is, as if it too were a form of technology and not simply a verbal art, that allows Gusmão to reconcile the natural and organic with the technological. This can be seen for instance, in the poem, or prose poem, or film script, that is the section titled “No Labirinto das Imagens”. Allowing typography to separate certain parts of the text as if they were poems inside the poem, Gusmão further questions and provokes the supposed distinction between the exalted language of poetry and the more pragmatic form of prose. One of these reads thus:

Fechados os olhos, a mão dispara sobre
as fotografias e acerta no alvo;
fixa o desenho no centro da praia, da folha
de luz contra a parede, para que a vertigem não
acometa o olhar e os fragmentos
que ele balbucia (Gusmão 2013: 60)

As it is obvious, this passage, this poem within a poem, this fragment is itself a reflection on the process of writing and seeing that prevents any simple distinction between the different terms. The eyes are closed but see, the hand becomes itself a machine or a gun, shooting at the photos and fixing the drawing in the center of a beach that is also the partly blank page where the fragments (of the poem, of the drawing, of the photo?) are lined up by the light as if against the wall in a sort of execution. Nowhere does this poem allow for a view of art that is not itself always a form of technology or for a form of nature,

human or otherwise, that is also not itself always already a form of technological imagination with all the violence that such a process entails. Impossible to romanticize such a process of producing images, but equally impossible to deny their power and beauty.

As is well known, Manuel Gusmão also has an extensive critical production and his theoretical observations on poetry, even if anchored on the poetry of other writers, must be kept in mind regarding his own. In *Tatuagem e Palimpsesto*, Gusmão provides a series of possible definitions for poetry, from which I would like to cite the following as they seem to be especially indicative of his own practice:

A poesia talvez seja a arte de praticar (de descobrir e inventar) possíveis verbais, gestos de um sentido em falta ou em excesso;

-- talvez que, respondendo às suas compulsões, ela seja uma técnica do nosso corpo histórico singular pela qual induzimos ou intermediamos os sonhos da tribo (palavras, imagens, ritmos e os sentidos do sentido);

-- ou talvez a figura e a energia de um desejo de vida e de mundo; (Gusmão 2010: 19)

I would like to call special attention to the way in which in these tentative definitions, or approximations, of a possible sense, or senses, of poetry, Gusmão already privileges the notion of poetry as a form of technic of the body at the same time that he associates it with the concept of figure. It is perhaps also relevant to note that in the same essay Gusmão invokes the figure of the Angel of History from Benjamin in relation to the possibility of poetry to do that which the Angel was unable to do:

E se o *anjo da história* não pode ‘acordar os mortos e reunir os vencidos’, talvez a poesia possa gravar nas margens da história – na areia das suas praias como entre as linhas da sua escrita – a esperança que sobrevive a todos os desastres. Essa gravação que a leve mão do vento pode apagar é contudo uma marca ou uma figura que vem do futuro: porque é sempre no futuro-agora que lemos. (Gusmão 2010: 21)

There is no doubt how important Benjamin is for Gusmão’s own theoretical and creative practice as references to his work abound in both the essays and the poems. This has of course been noted and Rosa Maria Martelo, for instance, also makes reference to the thesis on the concept of history, with which I started this paper. With that in mind, perhaps

it would not be too far-fetched wanting to see in that decapitated Turkish doll yet another allusion to Benjamin. Precisely the first thesis on the concept of History starts with the reference to a Turkish doll. Benjamin refers to the story of an automaton, a doll dressed in traditional Turkish garb, that would defeat all opponents in a game of chess. In reality, the doll was operated by a dwarf who was a genial chess master. The point of the story is the well-known and controversial comment on historical materialism:

Zur dieser Apparatur kann man sich ein Gegenstück in der Philosophie vorstellen. Gewinnen soll immer die Puppe, die man 'historisches Materialismus' nennt. Sie kann es ohne weiteres mit jedem aufnehmen, wenn sie die Theologie in ihren Dienst nimmt, die heute bekanntlich klein und häßlich ist und sich ohnehin nicht darf blicken lassen. (Benjamin 1977: 251)

[One can imagine a philosophical counterpart to this device. The puppet called 'historical materialism' is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology, which today, as we know, is wizened and has to keep out of sight. (Benjamin 1968: 253)]

Keeping to this analogy then, how can one read Gusmão's poem? Is the propeller as a symbol for technology then the instrument that would decapitate the Turkish doll and break the illusion? Would the poet who held the doll in his hands then a figure of the dwarf, master at chess and deception? And would the propeller then be that which would stop the illusion afforded by ideology and expose its theological underpinnings? The meaning of Benjamin's allegory is contested and whereas some would see in the use of quotation marks around "historical materialism" an ironic reference to its abuse at the hands of those seeking to fool the masses in disregard for Marx's views, others recall Benjamin's own troubled struggle with the precepts of historical materialism and his own messianic interests. Be that as may be, if one were to read Gusmão's poem in the light of Benjamin's thesis perhaps one could say that Gusmão both pays homage to Benjamin and to his questioning of the illusory function of any ideology, and goes beyond Benjamin as in his poetry there is no space left for any messianic wishes or nostalgic longing for the past except as a form of History that must inform the present-future time and of which poetry would be a form. The poet is both the manipulating dwarf as well as the one who is able to bring forth the figure of the cutting

propeller. He is not a visionary but he is able to conjure up the concrete, material, images that allow for an imagination of the future.

All the poems then, whether those that describe a film or the process of filming, those that transpose the figures of drawings from one page to another, from one art to another, or those that most visibly bring forth a form of technology as agent or active force, practice a conflation between the natural and the technical that extends to the book itself as a material object. In the poem “Capa” with which the first section “Do caderno” opens is a clear example of such synergetic writing:

Ramos lianas folhas e fios tecem
a clara teia que seca a humidade
da voz dos carvalhos e castanheiros
e apaga o fulgurante vermelho
dos zimbros
e depois
pintados de verde azul vêm
envolver e enredar a capa
deste caderno cujas páginas
reciclam a natureza
a máquina natural de atrair
e capturar a multidão mínima
dos encantados cantadores (Gusmão 2013: 11)

Like the word “zimbros” which both means “morning dew” and the shrubby juniper from whose berries Jenever, or Dutch gin is traditionally made, so the book, the caderno, is both made of natural products and a machine, even a natural machine for creating desire. At the same time it also is a form of tracing and retracing all those images that it recalls and invents, from the landscapes evoked to the films watched or the drawings contemplated and analysed. Body, tools and nature all become variants of the same: “Mãos espalmadas, dedos rápidos e habilidosas unhas / armadas ou não, de gravetos ou de um galho / quebrado, como se fossem pincéis” (*idem*: 103). Poetry thus becomes itself a figure for that which it would represent, but without any self-congratulatory or triumphant illusions, as the following stanza reminds us in its questioning:

Sois agora
fantasmas sem representação. Feitos
toda a paisagem.
Ou feitos da matéria
Da paisagem?

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