

# Jonathas de Andrade's *O Peixe*: A Parable of Extinction

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*Life and death of hypotheses.  
From the equation ego part of the Kosmos to the axiom kosmos part of ego.  
Subsistence. Knowledge.  
Anthropophagy.*

*Anthropophagus Manifesto*, 1928  
Oswaldo de Andrade

The visitor enters a dark room illuminated by the glow of a screen. A 37-minute video portrays ten fishermen repeating a similar action in a permanent loop. There is no beginning; there is no end as the screen reveals the slow, agonising death of ten fish in the arms of ten fishermen. Like a deathly lullaby, the repetitive looped sequence of the fishermen gently stroking and rocking the dying fish is as disarming as it is unexpected.

In 2016, the contemporary Brazilian artist Jonathas de Andrade produced a video piece entitled *O Peixe* (The Fish). Ever since its debut at the 32nd São Paulo Biennial in 2016, *O Peixe* has been touring worldwide, including a screening at the 16th Istanbul Biennial (2019). De Andrade was born in Brazil's Northeast Region in 1982, in the state of Alagoas, and is currently based in Recife. His multidisciplinary approach, expressed in photography, video and installations, fuses conceptual art practices with social investigation.

The visual language appropriated by *O Peixe* emulates the format of ethnographic documentaries, but with a twist. De Andrade cannibalises the objective 'distant gaze' of the ethnographer and breaks through the fourth wall, diluting the limits between reality and fiction. Stretching the confines of the ethnographic documentary genre, de Andrade enters the terrain of ethnofiction and docufiction.

This article analyses the diverse and problematic issues this work has generated: the eroticisation of violence, colonialism and its rhetoric of the inevitability of domination, and its reception in Biennials. *O Peixe* prompts a series of profound philosophical debates that have been at the centre of social theory from the turn of this century, in particular those revolving around the ontological turn in anthropology. This 'turn' challenges the longstanding Western dichotomy of nature and culture and expands the object of anthropology beyond the *Anthropos* to include the study of human and non-human relations.

## O Peixe

The parable that de Andrade narrates takes place in a faraway land, in the Nordeste (Northeast) region of Brazil, between the fertile coastal area and the hinterlands where frequent droughts strike the land with poverty. The Northeast region was the first land to be discovered and colonised by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century, and then by the Dutch West India Company that built sugar mills and imported African slaves. Once a centre of the colonial slave economy working on the sugar and cotton plantations, it remains beset by vast inequalities.

*O Peixe* transports us to this hot and foreign land in 16 mm film. The exotic scenery of mangroves and the gently flowing waters of the São Francisco river conjure up an idyllic setting. Slightly washed-out colours, combined with the soothing soundscape of rippling water, the rustle of palm trees and the sound of oars hitting the water, generate a peaceful, gentle mood. In this pristine setting, far from the madness of the big cities, humankind is in touch with nature, and nature is in touch with humankind.



Still from Jonathas de Andrade, *O Peixe*, 2016, 16mm film transferred to 2k video, 37 mins (min 34:50), courtesy of Galleria Continua

However, something very unusual is about to take place in this exotic paradise. The first fisherman in the sequence is a young man. He wears only a pair of dark nylon shorts and manoeuvres his boat through the mangroves with a long stick, like a gondolier. The camera focuses on his naked back and torso as he glides across the water. He finds a spot and casts his net, his muscular and lean body contorting like a Greek discus thrower. His body is celebrated and exalted by the camera. The camera then moves in for a close-up of his gaze, first looking out at a distant point and then directly at the lens. In the next scene, the fisherman holds a fish against his naked chest and gently caresses its body. The proportions of the fish are enormous, accentuating the oddity of the scene and the fish's desperate struggle to survive. It is a scene of

extraordinary intimacy with a disturbing undertow of eroticism. Like a mother consoling a child, the fisherman strokes the dying fish until it gasps its last breath and dies.

Ten fishermen appear in *O Peixe*, all shirtless, dark-skinned men representing a wide range of ages. In some scenes, the fishermen struggle to dominate the huge fish as it flaps against their chests. All ten fishermen enact the same pre-mortem ritual with different degrees of emotion and intensity.



Stills from Jonathas de Andrade, *O Peixe*, 2016, 16mm film transferred to 2k video, 37 mins, courtesy of Galleria Continua

However, what appears to be the factual documentation of an authentic ritual responds to the imagination of the artist. The accompanying credits to *O Peixe* provided by de Andrade list the names, surnames and even the nicknames of the fishermen cast for the film along with a rather curious detail: the three types of fish caught by the fishermen – *pirarucú*, *tambuacu* and *tilápia* – were provided by three different fish farms for the film. None of them were caught naturally, and none of the scenes were repeated so as to avoid having to ‘procure’ another fish.

It is evident that *O Peixe* is staged. The fishermen, and even the fish, are cast by de Andrade to act out his particular, invented ritual. De Andrade is inspired by filmmaker, anthropologist and the father of ethnofiction Jean Rouch (1917–2004), who negated the idea of a ‘candid camera’, a ‘distant gaze’ that could register pure, unadulterated events.

I was fascinated by the ambiguity of Jean Rouch’s documentaries, by the experimental, innovative and yet classic approach. In other words, while they were classic and had that gaze, a gaze that sought to be neutral, he was also experimenting with assigning roles to the members of a community. They became actors of themselves, and this was insanely interesting.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Jonathas de Andrade, personal communication, 4 February 2020



Rouch was aware that the camera of the filmmaker interferes and conditions the events it records, and therefore replaced the empirical ‘distant gaze’ of the ethnographic filmmaker with a participant-observer cameraman, inviting observer and observed to engage in an ethnographic dialogue. Traditionally, the role of the ethnographer was to observe the ‘Others’ in situ and collect data, furnishing anthropologists with material to weave a comprehensive cultural theory. In this process, the ‘Others’ were reduced to objects of science.

In retaliation to this reductive approach, the revolutionary Martiniquais thinker Édouard Glissant (1928–2011), in his *L’Intention poétique*, addresses the discomfort that postcolonial subjects felt towards ethnography as a methodological tool for structuralist anthropology, which aimed to reveal, through the study of ‘Others’, the underlying structure common to all human societies. Glissant states, ‘The distrust we feel towards (ethnography) comes not from the displeasure at being watched, but from the resentment at not watching in return’.<sup>2</sup> The problem, therefore, resides not in the gaze itself, which implies a movement towards the ‘Other’, but in the authority over knowledge; the ideation that an omniscient foreign subject is capable of registering the entire world of an ‘Other’ without engaging in a mutual exchange.

De Andrade’s staged ritual recalls Rouch’s experiments in which the mobile cameraman is no longer an objective, impartial recorder but suggests different roles for the participants and gets caught up in the moment. Like in Rouch’s controversial docufictions, in *O Peixe* ‘there is a performance aspect...I invited the fishermen to help me tell a story of fishermen hugging a fish’.<sup>3</sup>



Still from Jonas de Andrade, *O Peixe*, 2016, 16mm film transferred to 2k video, 37 mins (min 12.06), courtesy of Galleria Continua

<sup>2</sup> Édouard Glissant, *L’Intention poétique*, Nathalie Stephens, trans, Nightboat Books, New York, 2009

<sup>3</sup> Jonas de Andrade, personal communication, 4 February 2020



De Andrade uses a hand-held camera, wide-angle lens shots and sensual close-ups, generating a dialogic framing that repositions the subject and the objects of observation. The accompanying credits emphasise the performative aspect of the piece, debunking the assumption of the ethnographer's authority over knowledge and interpretation. Furthermore, the voyeuristic desire of the ethnographer/filmmaker, who wants to see without being seen, is shattered when the fishermen look directly into the camera lens. The 'distant gaze' of the western ethnographer/filmmaker, in which ethnography, understood as a field study of alterity, was traditionally constructed, is interrupted in de Andrade's fiction. Through dialogical framing, de Andrade metamorphoses the object of observation (the fishermen) into an active participant, reframing structuralist ethnography in a metaphorical and expressive practice. Thus, *O Peixe* becomes a collaborative effort, an exercise in shared anthropology.

## The Eroticisation of Violence

*O Peixe* plays with our expectations and generates conflicting reactions. As de Andrade comments:

Referencing some of the stereotypical aspects of Brazil, such as tropicality and sexuality, enables the audience to relax and let their guard down in the face of a tale being told about a tropical land far, far away. And while they are letting their guard down, this same audience might be taken by surprise by some questions lying right there, like contradictions of the soul itself.<sup>4</sup>

The initial sense of peaceful harmony is suddenly shattered as the odd, fish-hugging ritual begins. When the fisherman starts to stroke the fish, we feel aversion. Why would a human be caressing a cold-blooded, slippery, scaly fish? We are so caught up in the strangeness of the moment that we forget, for almost an entire minute, that the fish is gasping for air and dying a slow, agonising death. We are shocked by the outcome. The fisherman does not throw it back into the water but lets it die on screen, in front of us. Our sanitised relationship with death is confronted on the walls of the gallery or museum and we become witnesses to a slaughter. Like the gore movie addict who needs stronger and stronger sensations and even hunts down snuff movies, or our morbid fascination with traffic accidents – we do not want to look, but we cannot stop looking, we are completely captivated by the scene. This morbid yet erotic staging is emphasised when the first fisherman in the sequence has an erection during his nap. The fact that the fish die of asphyxiation can recall the sexual practice of asphyxiophilia where the person being strangled is known as a 'gasper', literally gasping for breath.

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<sup>4</sup> Vivian Gandelsman and Germano Dushá, 'In Recife, Jonathas de Andrade takes the world to ask for its impending ecological collapse', *Art Basel*, 2018 <https://www.artbasel.com/stories/jonathas-de-andrade-profile-ecological-collapse>, accessed 12 January 2021

So why does no one run out of the room in shock horror? By appropriating the visual language of ethnographic documentaries, de Andrade uses Western media through which domination (and violence) have been naturalised. The supposedly neutral gaze of the adventurous, white European ethnographer is eroticised in de Andrade's fiction:

I invented this ritual with the excuse of highlighting the gaze of a camera that eroticises a relationship that isn't *per se* erotic. Anthropology as a discipline that seeks to document but ends up eroticising and exoticising its subject.<sup>5</sup>

The violence we witness is disguised under an erotic filter that downplays the extreme brutality of the act.

### Anthropophagus Metaphysics

The constructed image of the 'Other' depicted by the ethnographic filmmaker has very particular characteristics that revert to stereotypes established by the first colonisers. *O Peixe* triggers a dialogue with historical narratives that have justified colonialism and exploitation as inevitable historical processes. These discourses, however, do not only infest Western pre-conceptions of the 'Other' but are also present in the local Brazilian narratives. According to de Andrade, this project represents the devouring of the anthropological gaze, a cannibalisation of preconceptions that have distorted the image of the Brazilian Northeasterner.<sup>6</sup>

Following the arrival of the Portuguese and the Dutch West India Company in the sixteenth century, the first travel books and journals of the explorers of the New World started to arrive in Europe. The images of the 'savage cannibals' depicted by these proto-ethnographers fascinated European artists, and engravings depicting these ferocious primitives began to circulate. In 1557, Theodor de Bry, a Belgian engraver, depicted the horrified gaze of Hans Staden as he watched a group of native savages dismembering and roasting a human body over a fire.<sup>7</sup> The engraving, *Cannibalism in Brazil*, became one of the most distributed images of Brazil.<sup>8</sup>

Cannibalism became the pretext that allowed Europeans to conceive of the Amerindian indigenous people of Brazil as those barbaric 'Others', in opposition to the civilised Western 'Self'. The Argentinian LGTB activist Carlos Jáuregui, in his paper 'Anthropophagy', says:

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<sup>5</sup> Jonathas de Andrade, personal communication, 4 February 2020

<sup>6</sup> Jonathas de Andrade, personal communication, 4 February 2020

<sup>7</sup> Hans Staden was a German mercenary for the Portuguese. He travelled throughout South America and was held captive by the Tupinambá in Brazil. The story of his captivity and his quest for freedom were told in *True History: An Account of Cannibal Captivity in Brazil*, a book he published in 1557 that immediately became a European bestseller. In the preface he described his work as a 'True description of a country of naked, ferocious and savage cannibals'; Hans Staden, *Hans Staden: The True History of His Captivity, 1557*, RM McBride, New York, 1929, p 13.

<sup>8</sup> Adriana Erthal Abdenur, 'Devouring International Relations: Anthropophagy and the Study of South-South Cooperation', *Researching South-South Cooperation: The Politics of Knowledge Production*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2019, pp 50–76

Cannibalism, as a trope that sustains the very distinction between savagery and civilisation, is a cornerstone of colonialism. However, the metaphor of cannibalism has been not just a paradigm for the incorporation of otherness but also a trope of self-recognition, a model for the incorporation of difference, and a central concept in the definition of Latin American identities.<sup>9</sup>

Cannibalism as a trope of self-recognition was the strategy that the Brazilian poet Oswald de Andrade (1890–1954) adopted in his *Manifesto Antropófago* (Anthropophagus Manifesto).<sup>10</sup> He proposed cannibalism as a methodological vehicle to create a unique Brazilian aesthetic. Devouring the ‘Other’ was a joyful antidote to the imitation of European aesthetics: the movement ingested European cultural products, digested them and regurgitated them into new cultural products that were mixed with native elements.



Theodor de Bry, *Cannibalism in Brazil*, 1557, engraving, private collection, Rio de Janeiro, source: Wikimedia Commons, accessed 5 February 2020

The transfiguration of the Western taboo of cannibalism into a mechanism of self-recognition paved the way for other epistemological and anthropological inquiries into the validity of the Western dichotomy between the civilised and the primitive; that is, the Western schism of nature and culture, the hallmark of colonial domination. This dichotomy was reinforced by the

<sup>9</sup> Carlos Jáuregui, ‘Anthropophagy’, *Dictionary of Latin American Cultural Studies*, R M Irwin and M Szurmuk, eds, University Press of Florida, Gainesville, Florida, 2012, pp 22–28

<sup>10</sup> Oswald de Andrade, ‘Manifesto Antropófago’ [1928], *Revista de Antropofagia*, año 1, no 1, *Nuevo texto crítico*, Vol 12, No 1, 1999, pp 25–31



rationalistic depiction of nature promoted by modern naturalism. It presented nature as the setting in which human activity takes place, a mine of resources that must be tamed in order to satisfy human necessities. Nature and culture were presented as two antagonistic dimensions leading Thomas Hobbes (1588–1678) to think of the colonial ‘Self’ as the one entrusted with the moral task of freeing the barbaric cannibal from his natural state.

The depiction of the cannibal was appropriated more recently by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro in his book *Metafísicas Caníbales* (Cannibal Metaphysics).<sup>11</sup> Viveiros de Castro is a Brazilian anthropologist and a key exponent of the ontological turn in anthropology.<sup>12</sup> These theories seek to deconstruct the depiction of nature promoted by modern naturalism by questioning what we conceive as ‘real’ and proposing alternative ways to interpret the nature/culture divide.

Viveiros de Castro comes to terms with the colonial origins of anthropology as a discipline. By devouring the Western anthropologist and his academic genealogy, he shifts the object of anthropology from the study of the ‘Other’ to the study of the totality of non-human systems in which humans are caught. His ontological project, ‘Amerindian Perspectivism’, analyses and interprets the ways in which humans, animals, spirits and other entities relate to one another. In an interview, de Andrade recognised that getting the fishermen to perform this gesture of embracing the dying fish put them at the level of species again.<sup>13</sup>

The Western divide of nature and culture is unable to account for the configuration of human and non-human relations within Amerindian mythology and cosmology. ‘Amerindian Perspectivism’ is an ontology in which the world is apprehended from different ‘points of view’ by different classes of beings, all of whom are endowed with consciousness and culture.<sup>14</sup> *‘Lo que para nosotros es sangre, para los jaguares cerveza de mandioca’* (What for us is blood is a cassava beer for the jaguar).<sup>15</sup>

It is not the depiction of an anthropomorphised world but instead the depiction of a world that is inhabited by beings that possess agency and perspective. Viveiros de Castro replaces Western multicultural cosmology – the ideation that nature is a single and stable entity that is accessed by a plurality of different cultures – with a multinaturalist cosmology representing a plurality of natures that are accessed from one holistic culture. The epistemologically disturbing

<sup>11</sup> Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Metafísicas caníbales. Líneas de antropología postestructural*, Katz Editores, Buenos Aires, 2010

<sup>12</sup> Key exponents of this paradigmatic shift are Philippe Descola (*Beyond Nature and Culture*, University Chicago Press, 2013); Eduardo Kohn (*How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*, University of California Press, Berkeley / Los Angeles / London, 2013); Tim Ingold, Mario Blaser and Bruno Latour. For more information, see Daniel Ruiz Sernad and Carlos del Cairo, ‘El giro ontológico en torno al naturalismo moderno’, *Revista de Estudios Sociales*, no 55, 2016, pp 193–204, and Oliver Surel, ‘Let a Hundred Natures Bloom: A Polemical Trope in the “Ontological Turn” of Anthropology’, *Krisis*, issue 2, 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Jonathas de Andrade, ‘Jonathas de Andrade: O Peixe’, audio guide produced for the New Museum exhibition, 2017

<sup>14</sup> For Viveiros de Castro, it is the body and not the mind that conditions our understanding of the world. Humans and non-human entities all possess bodies, and it is the diversity of the bodily features that generate a plurality of perspectives, of ‘points of view’. The differences between societies (human or non-human) are due to the world that their ‘point of view’ allows them to know; Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, ‘Perspectivismo y multinaturalismo en la América indígena’, in *Racionalidad y discurso mítico*, Adolfo Chaparro and Christian Schimacher, eds, UR, Bogotá, 2003, pp 191–243.

<sup>15</sup> Translated quotation from Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s ‘Perspectivismo y multinaturalismo en la América indígena’, *ibid*, p 217 (translation by the author)

character of his proposal repositions nature as something much more complex than the backdrop of human activities; nature is an emergent property, and therefore, it has plural manifestations.

De Andrade's work can be interpreted in light of 'Amerindian Perspectivism' and anthropophagy. What appears at first glance to be a relation of dominance of the camera over the fisherman, and of the fisherman over the fish is radically subverted in light of these considerations. *O Peixe* inverts the chain of command when the fisherman looks directly into the camera lens:

The direct gaze of the fishermen into the lens was really important for me. It was a way of short-circuiting the idea that we are spectators of a traditional documentary. They destabilise the narrative. It's a gaze that confronts the desires of the camera.<sup>16</sup>

The fisherman escapes from the exoticised alterity in which the camera lens seeks to anchor him. The fisherman is aware of the fact that he is being observed; he sees and looks straight at the spectator in the museum or gallery room. By confronting the desires of the camera, the fisherman self-recognises himself in the projected primitivist fantasies of the ethnographer and the Western spectator. He devours our projections with his intense gaze. The illusion of being in front of an objective documentary is broken, and fantasy intertwines with reality.



Still from Jonathas de Andrade, *O Peixe*, 2016, 16mm film transferred to 2k video, 37 mins (min 11.56), courtesy of Galleria Continua

But the power of this gaze reverberates even further. The reification of a single point of view – that of the 'Self' over the 'Other' – is the metaphysical architecture upon which processes of colonisation have been justified, colonisation understood in the widest sense of the word as the

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<sup>16</sup> Jonathas de Andrade, personal communication, 4 February 2020

dominion of humans over every living thing. Viveiros de Castro's perspectivist ontology uproots the validity of a single point of view and reconceptualises anthropology as a permanent exercise of decolonisation.<sup>17</sup> By short-circuiting the ethnographer's 'distant gaze', the fisherman and the fish regain agency and recover a long lost point of view that opens alternative paths to understand human–animal relations.

The words of Jacques Derrida echo strongly within *O Peixe*. In Derrida's book that was assembled posthumously, *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, based on the lectures he gave in 1997 at the Cerisy Conference, the philosopher talks about the point of view of the animal regarding us – the gaze that philosophy had forgotten:

The point of view of the absolute other ... when I see myself seen naked under the gaze of the cat ... The gaze called 'animal' offers to my sight the abyssal limit of the human: the inhuman or the ahuman.<sup>18</sup>

The 'absolute other' comes forward in de Andrade's docufiction subverting the predatorial power structures and historical narratives on which colonial domination has been justified.

## Anthropophagus Masculinities

This double strategy of cannibalising and decolonising the validity of a single point of view through the deconstructive power of the fishermen's gaze can also be applied to the image that the Northeastern male has of himself. In de Andrade's words, the Northeasterner is envisioned as 'a worker, a brute, a strong man who works with force, with his arms and hands'.<sup>19</sup> If the constructed image of the 'Other' depicted in ethnographic films took us back to the first colonisers, the projected image of the Northeastern male takes us back to the Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre. Freyre, in his seminal work *Casa-Grande e Senzala* (translated as *The Masters and The Slaves*), conceived Brazil as a multiracial and multicultural nation and was the first to consider miscegenation in positive terms.<sup>20</sup> Considered the father of the concept of 'racial democracy', he depicts Brazil as the land of racial harmony, despite the structural presence of slavery.<sup>21</sup>

In 1979, Freyre created an anthropology museum in Recife, the Museu do Homem do Nordeste (Museum of the Northeastern Man), with the intention of consolidating the ethno-genesis and identity of the Northeastern region. It was the result of the conjunction of three previous museums: the Museum of Anthropology, the Folk Museum and the Sugar Museum.

<sup>17</sup> Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Metafísicas caníbales. Líneas de antropología postestructural*, op cit, p 17

<sup>18</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)', by David Wills, trans, *Critical Inquiry*, vol 28, no 2, 2002, p 372

<sup>19</sup> William Harris, 'Jonathas de Andrade, One to One', *The White Review*, June 2019 <http://www.thewhitereview.org/reviews/jonathas-de-andrade-one-one/>, accessed 12 January 2020

<sup>20</sup> Gilberto Freyre, *Casa-grande e Senzala: Formação da Família Brasileira sob o Regimen do Economia Patriarchal*, Schmidt, Rio de Janeiro, 1933

<sup>21</sup> For more information, see César Braga-Pinto, 'Sugar Daddy: Gilberto Freyre and the White Man's Love for Blacks', in *The Masters and the Slaves: Plantation Relations and Mestizaje in American Imaginaries*, Alexandra Isfahami-Hammond, ed, Springer, 2005, pp 19–33; Idelber Avelar 'Escenas decibles, escenas indecibles: raza y sexualidad en Gilberto Freyre', in *Cuadernos de Literatura*, vol 21, no 42, 2017, pp 96–118



The man in charge of transferring Freyre's ideas to the museum was his friend Aécio de Oliveira, who directed the museum from 1979 to 1986. De Oliveira coined the term *museologia morena* (brown museology) to tropicalise the museological discourse. The museum depicted the Northeast as the land of sugar cane, of sex and of the rough and ignorant man of the *sertão* (hinterland).

De Andrade was not satisfied with Freyre's feudal depiction and created a duplicate of the museum with the same name but with a twist. De Andrade's *Museu do Homem do Nordeste* takes the name literally and becomes a museum of Northeastern masculinity, a space to deconstruct the macho stereotype of the Brazilian labourer. De Andrade's duplicate museum is the conceptual and material framework for *O Peixe*.

Although de Andrade cast the fishermen to tell his story, he gave them no indications regarding the emotional involvement required. Some of them spontaneously press their lips against the fish, a last gentle kiss before death; others increase the rhythm of their caresses as the fish gives up its struggle. The fishermen transform their daily labour into a private, emotional act debunking the stereotype of the predatorial, violent, insensitive male. As de Andrade explains, 'I was very interested in the idea of possessing and killing, of depleting nature, of the fact that this predatorial relationship is canonically represented by the male sex'.<sup>22</sup> With *O Peixe*, de Andrade offers a different point of view of masculinity, depicting men who relate to and feel for the dying fish.



Still from Jonathas de Andrade, *O Peixe*, 2016, 16mm film transferred to 2k video, 37 mins (min 34.05), courtesy of Galleria Continua

<sup>22</sup> Jonathas de Andrade, personal communication, 4 February 2020

## An old tradition or a new beginning?

*O Peixe* was presented for the first time in 2016 at the 32nd São Paulo Biennial, 'Live Uncertainty', and more recently in 2019 in the 16th Istanbul Biennial, 'The Seventh Continent'. In both Biennials, the word 'Anthropocene' reverberates throughout the catalogue pages, yet giving rise to very different interpretations.

Julia Buenaventura, the author of the description of de Andrade's video in the catalogue of the 32nd Sao Paulo Biennial, *Live Uncertainty*, describes *O Peixe* as 'the reconciliation dreamed of by so many modern men, but that the artist seems to perceive as an old tradition rather than a utopian future'.<sup>23</sup> Buenaventura describes de Andrade's work through the filter of nostalgia in terms of an unattainable reconciliation, an 'old tradition' that is inaccessible to the bourgeois urbanite. Her interpretation of *O Peixe* suggests a reminiscence of former times, an atemporal place where fishermen still navigate with rustic wooden canoes. A natural, naked state of being, where the purported idea of progress comes to a standstill.



Still from Jonathas de Andrade, *O Peixe*, 2016, 16mm film transferred to 2k video, 37 mins (min 35.58), courtesy of Galleria Continua

Buenaventura's interpretation evokes all the fears that art historian Hal Foster expressed in his article 'The artist as ethnographer?' when addressing what he called the 'quasi-anthropological paradigm' in contemporary art.<sup>24</sup> The 'artist as ethnographer' works with targeted communities that are supposedly situated in a position of alterity, of otherness. However, in a near-global economy, geopolitical models of centre and periphery can no longer be presupposed. Alterity, therefore, can only be created by the way in which an artist depicts the community he engages

<sup>23</sup> Julia Buenaventura, 'Jonathas de Andrade', in *Incerteza Viva*, 32nd Bienal de São Paulo exhibition catalogue, 2016, p 202 <https://issuu.com/bienal/docs/32bsp-catalogo-web-en>, accessed 1 January 2021

<sup>24</sup> Hal Foster, 'The Artist as Ethnographer', in *The Return of the Real*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1996, pp 171–205

with. By visually generating the ideation of the fisherman as reminiscent of former times, de Andrade would be falling into what Foster referred to as ‘ethnographic self-fashioning’, in which ‘the artist is not decentred so much as the other is fashioned in artistic guise ... its effect may be to “other” the self more than to “serve” the other’.<sup>25</sup>

Offering a different interpretation, Nicolas Bourriaud, the curator of the 2019 Istanbul Biennial, sees *O Peixe* as a representative of the ontological turn that has revolutionised our understanding of anthropology. In the opening article of the Biennial catalogue, ‘The Seventh Continent: Theses upon Art in the Age of Global Warming’, Bourriaud refers to *O Peixe* in section five of the article subtitled ‘Human beings do not hold a monopoly over sign emission’ and references theories exposed by Eduardo Kohn in his book *How Forests Think* and the ‘Amerindian Perspectivism’ developed by Viveiros de Castro.<sup>26</sup> Using this framework, Bourriaud includes de Andrade’s work as an exponent of the paradigm shift that has shaken the foundations of anthropology – the ontological turn. For Bourriaud, *O Peixe* defies the Western dichotomy between nature/culture and opens alternative paths to an understanding of human–animal relations.

In light of these interpretations, *O Peixe* stands on the razor’s edge of the dangers of ‘ethnographic self-fashioning’. Foster considers that in these types of practices, very few of the principles of the ethnographic participant-observer are present and that despite the best intentions, a very limited engagement with the communities that are studied is achieved.<sup>27</sup> The project becomes an installation in a museum, and the collaborative, site-specific dimension of the work gets lost under ‘ethnographic self-fashioning’.<sup>28</sup> If we follow what Buenaventura postulates, de Andrade would be mythologising the fishermen as figures that are capable of deconstructing masculinity and the colonial narrative of domination instead of seeing this as the projected image of the artist over the ‘natives’.

One of the questions in the interview with de Andrade (see footnote 13) addressed the concept of ‘devolution’ to calibrate the ethical and participative involvement of the artist with the community. In contemporary ethnography, the concept of ‘devolution’ has become the ethical standpoint of this practice. It seeks to avoid that the studied communities become simple laboratories from which to extract data for further studies or to corroborate a previously determined theoretical point. By ‘giving back’ the work to the native communities for them to evaluate, they are given agency to comment on and correct the ethnographer’s conclusions.<sup>29</sup> De Andrade does not let us down, and after filming the video he went back to Piaçabuçu and

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p 178

<sup>26</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, ‘The Seventh Continent: Theses upon Art in the Age of Global Warming’, in *The Seventh Continent*, 16th Istanbul Biennial exhibition catalogue, 2019, pp 14–46

<sup>27</sup> By ‘participant observation’ Foster is referring to the method in which the researcher does not simply observe the community he is studying like an outsider, but actively engages with it by participating in the activities of the group.

<sup>28</sup> Foster, op cit, pp 171–205

<sup>29</sup> Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson, *Etnografía: Métodos de Investigación*, Mikel Aramburu Otazu, trans, Paidós, Barcelona, 1994, pp 283–309



Cururipe, the villages from where the fishermen came, to hand out still frames from the video and to show extracts of it to the fishermen. He also intends to hold a screening for the community.<sup>30</sup>

What becomes more evident when comparing the representation of *O Peixe* in the two Biennial catalogues it has featured in, is the difference in temporality with which they address the piece. Buenaventura sees *O Peixe* as the exponent of an ‘old tradition’, while Bourriaud opens it to the future – a reaction to the imminent climate catastrophes in the era of the Anthropocene.

Instead of being anchored in the past, *O Peixe* functions as a contemporary parable: the tale of the fishermen becomes a more generic tale of humanity and the immediate problems we are being urged to address in these times of environmental collapse. Our relationship with our world has to change; we need to review the established predatorial power structures.

I started to see how we are collaborating collectively in the brutal destruction of the planet. And at the same time how we are incapable of controlling it as individuals. *O Peixe* uses ambiguity to highlight this contradiction. *O Peixe* is a tale of love but also of violence and destruction. *O Peixe* seeks to expose the profound human contradictions that mark our age.<sup>31</sup>

Far from reinforcing the stereotypical clichés of the ‘native savage’, *O Peixe* connects with the current theoretical discourses. Through the deconstructive power of the fishermen’s gaze and the ambiguous dialogical framing of the piece, de Andrade challenges the stereotypes of tropicity, sexuality and masculinity that populate the local narrative of the Northeasterners and which are also manifest in the prejudices that the rest of the country harbours towards this region.



Stills from Jonas de Andrade, *O Peixe*, 2016, 16mm film transferred to 2k video, 37 mins, courtesy of Galleria Continua

<sup>30</sup> *O Peixe* in its shorter version (23 minutes) was presented at the short film ‘Festival de Brasília’ in 2017. De Andrade and the artistic director were accompanied by one of the fishermen/actors. In his more recent video piece *Jogos Dirigidos* (Directed Games), created in 2019, the concept of ‘devolution’ lies at the core of its inception. This project assembles the testimonies of several deaf-mute locals from the Várzea Queimada community. Once the video was edited, de Andrade organised a screening for the community.

<sup>31</sup> Jonas de Andrade, personal communication, 4 February 2020

By appropriating the format of ethnographic documentaries, de Andrade plays with our expectations; we let our guard down and are confronted with the profound contradictions that mark the narratives of our age. *O Peixe* exposes the voyeuristic gaze of the bourgeois urbanite and invites the spectators to confront their primitivist fantasies, to come to terms with a gaze still redolent of colonialism. *O Peixe* successfully cannibalises the colonial point of view destabilising the metaphysical architecture upon which the processes of colonisation, understood as the overall domination of humans over every living being, have been justified.

The accompanying credits emphasise the performative dimension of the piece; the fishermen and even the fish are cast by de Andrade to act out this disturbing pre-mortem ritual. It becomes a collaborative effort, an exercise in ethnographic dialogue aimed to reconceptualise anthropology as a permanent exercise of decolonisation. *O Peixe* uproots the belief of a single point of view – the human view over nature – and shifts the object of anthropology towards the subjective multitude of human and non-human signifying networks.

As a contemporary parable, *O Peixe* addresses the ethical contradictions that are present in our times, particularly those relating to the eroticisation and naturalisation of violence, violence over other human beings, over animals, and the entire natural world. It is also a tribute, albeit staged, to the power of love and kindness towards all creatures, great and small.

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