

\* **New writings and mediations in health**

## **Outside the image field: an essay on Bispo do Rosário**

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### **Technical Features**

Prisioneiro da Passagem  
Director: Hugo Denizart  
Photography: John Howard Szerman  
Producer: CNPI  
Rio de Janeiro, 1982.  
DVD, 30min22sec, son, color

Who was Arthur Bispo do Rosário? May we consider artwork the objects he created in the inmost rooms of a psychiatric hospital? Or are those objects nothing but the result of his madness? Artist? Madman?

In the early 1980's, the enigmatic personality of Bispo do Rosário, and his provocative work, were shown to the world in the documentary film *O Prisioneiro da Passagem (The Prisoner of Passage)*<sup>1</sup>, directed by the psychiatrist and photographer Hugo Denizart (\*), and in the art exhibition *À margem da vida (On the sidelines of life)* held at MAM / RJ, in which the participation of Bispo was leveraged mainly by the documentary.

*The Prisoner of Passage* was funded by the Brazilian Ministry of Health, and it was part of a larger research coordinated by Hugo Denizart, who had wanted to record and denounce the inhuman living conditions at Colônia Juliano Moreira in Rio de Janeiro. Although the institution was part of the ministry itself, those were times of political openness in Brazil, and when different social groups and movements began to be represented in the spheres of government, and were engaged in the struggle for changes. In order to do so, it was necessary to denounce the indifference those people had been subjected to for so many years of psychiatric hospitalization.

The figure of the main character, Bispo do Rosário, in *The Prisoner of Passage*, makes this movie more poetic and flavorful than *Em nome da razão (In the Name of Reason)*. Willing to point out the excluding logic of psychiatry at that moment, Denizart also offers us the fantasy and disconcerting universe of Bispo do Rosário, a counterpoint to the harsh scenes of the asylum and the testimony of another "patient", who endowed with "reason" and indisputable clarity, reflects on what is at stake in the social exclusion term served by the hospital.

But, how many artists have existed or exist in human deposits that were and still are psychiatric hospitals, throughout the history of psychiatry in Brazil? Museum and art collections built from the artistic production of "psychiatric patients" tell us that there were many artists who were behind the fences and walls of psychiatric institutions<sup>2</sup>. Many works were produced in the psychiatric institutions and many artists were hospitalized. But that neither means that every work produced from the experience of madness is necessarily art, nor that every single mad person is necessarily an artist or vice versa. What is the line between madness and art? Only from the specificity of each art piece and each artist this question may be answered<sup>3</sup>.

The final scene of Denizart's movie shows up close the detail work of *Navios de guerra (Warships)*, where the word **combat** is embroidered. Accordingly, Bispo do Rosário is presented as synonymous of resistance and struggle against the psychiatric logic. But we can only think of this artist as one who endures, if we focus also very closely on other details of his work, his life, and his testimonies.

After Denizart's film and the contribution of Frederico Morais<sup>4</sup>, Bispo do Rosário stopped being just another of the inmates of Colônia Juliano Moreira, where he lived for nearly 35 uninterrupted years to become one of the greatest Brazilian contemporary artists. His appearance in the national and international arts scene caused disruptions, questionings in this area, and further discussions regarding several fields of knowledge.

We know very little about the life of Bispo do Rosário. In interviews granted to the social worker Conceição Robaina in 1988 and to Hugo Denizart, the artist did not seem interested in unveiling any details about his personal life. There is always something enigmatic entailing him. According to Hidalgo (1996) and Silva (1998), for example, Bispo do Rosário's date of birth is not exact, as well as whom his parents were. Everything about him is mysterious, including his ability to resist the mortification of the psychiatric hospital. The arts critic Frederico Morais (1989) says that Bispo do Rosário used to give his visitors, when they were about to enter his room or his studio, a riddle: "What is the color of my aura?"

According to official documents of the former Colônia Juliano Moreira, Bispo do Rosário was admitted to this hospital in 1939, under the diagnosis of paranoid-schizophrenia. In fact, we know from the artist's own testimony that he believed to be Jesus Christ, who had come to earth to judge the living and the dead on Judgement Day and had the mission to rebuild the world and introduce it to God in this Judgement Day.

It is also known that he had built over more than 50 years, which were interrupted by his death, a collection of works of art considered by audiences and critics as fantastic, creative and perplexing. Altogether there are 802 *assemblies*, sculptures, objects, and embroidery.

Bispo do Rosario died on July 5, 1989, from myocardial infarction and atherosclerosis. His career ended at Colônia Juliano Moreira, to where he had returned permanently in 1964, according to Morais (1989) and Hidalgo (1996).

About his life at the asylum, we have little more information. His surviving to the horrors of the asylum seems to have depended so much on his collaboration with that punitive system - the "save yourself if you can" type of logic. Bispo was the "sheriff" on his lodge, because he helped keep the order in the asylum, even using violence to do so - and, more importantly, his ability to create his very existence in the face of situations that the experience of madness pushed at him. And such creation involved several directions: the certainty that the place where he was kept locked up, was the place for "his holiness" as he himself says in the film *The Prisoner of Passage*; the finding a way to deal with the voices that invaded him, by occupying himself with embroidery, objects and *assemblies*; the establishment of a privileged position among technicians, patients and families, which allowed him to obtain the raw material that he needed. His life was driven by his creations, which later came to be legitimized as art. Everything was done for the fulfillment of his mission, thus making his work creation feasible.

Ergotherapy practices, praxis therapy, and occupational therapy, which have been largely used by psychiatry over the years, were not experimented by Bispo. He did not attend art workshops or therapy courses and did not have any contact with other artists. Bispo's creation was something related to his needs; it was imperative, as he explains in *The prisoner of the passage*: "I do it because they tell me to [the voices], if they didn't make me do it, I wouldn't do any of it." (Denizart, op. cit.).

Although Bispo did not have the intention of becoming an artist or building a body of work that became so important for the Brazilian culture, he created embroideries and objects that were acknowledged as art years later, when the conceptual formulations of the field of aesthetics advanced, expanding dramatically.

It is naive any attempt to consider Bispo do Rosário and his artwork from one single aspect, either his psychosis, or the shapes of his works and the aesthetic analysis based thereon, or by his experience of nearly 35 years in a psychiatric hospital. All these aspects are related and should be integrated in the analysis of his life and work.

It is not about denying Bispo's madness as part of his life, nor about using his insanity to justify his work, but it is about acknowledging his artistic potential, considering that his madness could not obscure his art and that his life was remarkable due to the experience of creation.

There is specificity about Bispo do Rosário, that both art critics as psychoanalysts agree with and which provides the former with arguments in favor of the art status of his work, and makes the latter reflect upon his work as a stabilization element of his psychosis. However, by examining the

literature on Bispo do Rosário, which consists of different types of texts – articles and other academic texts, catalogs, essays, photographs, and audiovisual documents – we found nothing that regarded his specificity based on a particular scene of *The Prisoner of Passage* that seems to be emblematic and that will be examined in this present work.

We intend to broaden the meaning of the expression **motion picture**, which relates directly to the world of film. The image that we will review here is also in motion, because it allows us more than one view, more than one reading, and more than one appropriation. As Comolli (2008) has reminded us, "Que nous apprend la pratique du cinéma sur la question du « document » ? Qu'il n'y a pas de document sans regard"

The image regards a moment in which, interpolated by Hugo Denizart, Bispo do Rosário talked about how he had ended up at Colônia Juliano Moreira and, thus, unveils, according to our interpretation, the function of the psychiatric institution in the concept of his artwork<sup>5</sup>.

The dialog in the scene unfolds as follows:

*Hugo Denizart* - How did you end up coming here to this hospital?

*Bispo do Rosário* - On December 22, I descended<sup>6</sup> in São Clemente, in Botafogo, I descended in the back of one of those houses, where I met by a family. On the following day, I went and introduced myself at the São Bento Monastery, on the 24th, and on the 24th I came here to Praia Vermelha<sup>7</sup>, I was sent by the friars.

*Hugo Denizart* - Did the friars send them there?

*Bispo do Rosário* - Yes, they recognized me, when I said: "I came to judge the living and the dead." They realized and told me to come to the asylum, and even before, in Ilha do Governador, I saw an evangelical man there in front of the chapel, had already said that I was coming to the asylum, to judge the living and the dead... it is only for those who see and understand...

*Hugo Denizart* - I see.

*Bispo do Rosário* - ... the person who is a doctor, for example, who is a psychiatrist. When I arrived at Praia Vermelha, within two days I was called to the medical board, Dr. Odilon Galotti and other physicians wanted to question me and they all realized that I represented their holiness ... and their holiness allowed the powerful house to be and the powerful house belongs to Christ, and so I went to live at the powerful house, to work on my miniatures, because they were able to see my vision.

The testimony of Bispo do Rosário is *off the record* and his works are used as cover-images. His artworks seem to "steal the scene", leaving the artist's speech behind. Besides that, Bispo do Rosário had diction problems probably because he needed dental prosthesis, therefore, it is difficult to understand what he says, and there is no closed caption.

The role of the psychiatric institution in the construction of his artwork is also mentioned by Bispo in another part of the movie. In this second piece of reference, the image of Bispo do Rosário himself, sitting while surrounded by his artwork, and wearing what is considered his masterpiece, *O manto* (*The mantle*), distracts us from his important speech. It is, again, his work that fascinates us; it is that one opportunity to see his pieces, which had been kept for so long hidden in the asylum, it just captures our attention. This assembling option refers to an attitude of resistance of art and of Bispo do Rosário to the discourse of psychiatry. However, what is the nature of such resistance? To what does he resist?

This interpretation of the meaning of the documentary film provide us with an analysis that includes the moment of political openness in Brazil and unpublished testimonies of the director on the film<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, it is possible to clarify what was really at stake in those images based on the context. It is also the dip in the film itself that allows us to such an interpretation, because as Comolli (2008) has pointed out, to cast an eye on documentation means to be part of the documentation itself, and thus, it allows us to infer its meaning. And such meaning is certainly fundamental, because of social, political and, most importantly, humanizing intention of the documentary.

However, this interpretation only regards meaning at a signification or symbolic level, considering the connotation to these terms given by Barthes (1990). The author defines this level as obvious meaning, which comes forward, it comes to us, a closed evidence. However, Barthes gives us a third definition.

As for the other meaning, the third one, that which is "extra", as a supplement that my intellection cannot absorb well, meanwhile it is elusive and stubborn, smooth and slippery, I propose calling it the

*obtuse meaning.* This word comes easily to my mind and, wonderful, as its etymology is unfolded it already expresses a theory of the supplementary meaning; *obtusus* which means, it is abyss... the third sense, it too seems greater than the pure, direct, cutting, neat perpendicular of the narrative: it seems to me that it totally opens a field of meaning, that is, infinitely... (p. 45)

However, the meaning on the level of significance, which emerges as closed evidence, is also what opens the path to another direction. In the attempts to construct closed meanings there is always something that escapes, as out of the meaning, a gap that will allow at some other time, the eruption of an obtuse meaning.

Comolli (2008) addresses the out of field of image issue, outside the temporal field, which also helps us with this problem. For Comolli, an image has the characteristic of being dynamic in function of time and of its passage, the time that constructs, deconstructs, and reconstructs the image, making us see what was not there before, but it starts to be acknowledged exactly because it was not there before. The outside the temporal field gives image an indeterminacy, treated by Comolli as inwardness, its own dynamics articulated by time and by the pursuit of other meanings.

After 28 years of the "discovery" of Bispo do Rosário, what intrigues us is a different meaning, its obtuse meaning, in the scene we chose to examine. It invites us to reflect upon the artist and his artwork from a different perspective.

Bispo do Rosário has become, for many, a symbol of resistance to the discourse and the practice of exclusionary psychiatry. But this formulation, which at first seems simple enough to be concluded, for us it should be taken in its complexity.

We believe that, to a certain extent, Bispo do Rosário was a resistance to psychiatry, once his work subverts everything that this knowledge proposes as possibility of producing the subject. Creation, subjectivity, art, and life were not part of, and are still not part of the plans of asylum psychiatry. Therefore, Bispo was resistant, he was subversive.

But Bishop was not a militant, neither an opposition critic of psychiatric logic, like other artists who were considered to be "mad" and admitted to hospices, such as Lima Barreto and Antonin Artaud. If we put everyone on the same level, fixing the so-called obvious meaning, we leave a fundamental fact out, which is that the analysis of the chosen scene shows what is defined as obtuse meaning: being in a psychiatric hospital was not a torment for Bispo, as it was for other artists mentioned; for Bispo, being in the hospital meant being acknowledged as Jesus Christ and it also meant that he had a mission to accomplish on earth.

A highly systematized delirium was built by the artist, an attempt to deal with his madness. Delirium, as Freud tells us (2004), is an attempt of healing when facing psychosis. Bispo was plagued by invasive voices, visions, and other phenomena that caused him suffering. According to Lacan (1988), psychosis is a manner of individual structuring in which its relationship with the Other does not find means to thwart the intrusion of such Other. Thus, the subject feels invaded by voices, visions, and actions that come from the outside, from some other place. In order to realize this, the subject creates versions that might explain to himself what he is experiencing, in other words, they create a different reality to account for what invades them, and which makes no sense to them whatsoever.

For Bispo, being hospitalized in a psychiatric institution meant being acknowledged as Jesus Christ, that is, his admission to the asylum was part of his delirium. Perhaps this fact best explains the reasons that led him to return to the asylum in 1964, and never leave after that; his submissive attitude with the punitive system of the institution and his ability to resist the subjective mortification imposed by a complete institution. It all shows a complex relationship with this institution: the construction of his artwork relies on his delusion, and on his relationship with the institution. However, paradoxically, his artwork supports the subjective potentiality of Bispo do Rosário, expressing everything that psychiatry tries to deny to the subject.

To wonder about the paradoxical relationship between Bispo and the institution means to consider a fault in the image of resistance built up for the artist, as well as reset the artist to another manner of resistance towards his specificity as a subject. We believe that such considerations may open new paths for the study of the work and life of Bispo do Rosário, since, by discussing the bases of the constitution of his delusion, we will probably create further consequences for the study of his work. However, it does not mean, and we insist on it, that his delirium is fuzzily integrated with his artwork, but instead, they meet in a complex and often dialectic relationship.

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## Notes

(\*) Hugo Denizart (Rio de Janeiro, RJ, 1946). Photographer, psychoanalyst, and film professor, videomaker. In 1973 he studied Psychoanalysis and then opened a psychoanalysis office. He worked as a photojournalist at *Jornal do Brasil* from 1971 to 1973. In 1974 and 1975, he made the movies *Maruim (Sand Gnat)* and *Vivendo (Living)*, respectively about fishermen that had lost their homes for floods and about sugar cane workers and retreatants. In 1976, Denizart was invited by the Ministry of Health to conduct a research with photographs on diseases of the rural population. From 1976 to 1980, he worked as a professor and taught photography and psychology at the Professional Joint Center (Centro Unificado Profissional), Rio de Janeiro. In Rio, he participated in his first conference in 1977 at the Graffiti Gallery. The following year, he made an individual exposition at the Andréa Sigaud Gallery and started a photography project in Cidade de Deus, both in Rio de Janeiro. Denizart participated in exhibitions in Paris and Arles, France, in New York and Sao Paulo. He then launched the documentary films *Líderes de Quadrilha (Leaders of Thieves)*, *Prisioneiro da Passagem (The Prisoner of Passage)* and *Região dos Desejos (Region of Desires)*, in 1980, 1982 and 1983. Denizart was awarded at the 12th National Art Exhibition (12º Salão Nacional de Arte) in Belo Horizonte, in 1980, and the 6th National Exhibition of Fine Arts of Funarte (6º Salão Nacional de Artes Plásticas da Funarte), Rio de Janeiro in 1983. He also participated in the Biennial of Photography in 1984, in Havana, and in 1987 in Rotterdam, Holland. In 1997, he launched the book *Engenharia Erótica: travestis no Rio de Janeiro (Erotic Engeneering: travesties in Rio)*, with photos and interviews.

1 This documentary film was shot at the psychiatric hospital Colônia Juliano Moreira in Rio de Janeiro. The film exposes the figure of the artist Arthur Bispo do Rosário, who at the time was still unknown in the art world. Bispo do Rosário gives interviews talking about his work and its conception. The artist's works and housing are first shown. The environment in which Bispo do Rosário lives is also portrayed, the inhuman conditions in which people lived in the Hospital is shown, as well as the inconsistency of the psychiatric discourse, which in contradiction to trying to cure mental illness, provides containment and mortification.

2 Concept developed by Erving Goffman to describe the institutions that define themselves as a "place of work and residence where a great number of similarly situated people, cut off from the wider community for a considerable time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life." (Goffman, E. *Asylums, Prisons and Monastery*).

3 For specific information on Bispo do Rosário's work see also CORPAS. F. Liberdade e desapego. **Santa Art Magazine**, n. 5, 2010.

4 Frederico Morais is a critic and historian of independent art. He was the first curator of the works of Bispo do Rosário and responsible inserting him in the world of visual arts.

5 As previously mentioned, no observation that would lead to the interpretation proposed here regarding this testimony was found in his biography. In general, such testimony is used only as biographical data, the rich information that underlies it has been ignored.

6 Bispo do Rosário believed and claimed to have fallen down from Heaven, he was supposedly brought down by seven angels to the yard where he lived in São Clemente street, in 1938. From that point on he started to consider himself Jesus Christ.

7 The National Mental Asylum (Hospício Nacional de Alienados), located at Praia Vermelha was where Bispo do Rosário first stayed. At the time, mentally ill people were sent there and then, depending on their health state, they were transferred to other hospitals. Bispo do Rosário was transferred to Colônia Juliano Moreira, to where chronically ill patients were sent.

8 Testimonies granted to the documentary film, during its production phase, entitled *Descobrimdo Bispo do Rosário* (*Discovering Bispo do Rosário*), directed by the author of this essay.

9 Even though we have no reports from Bispo on what regards the suffering that such phenomena might have caused, we know, through other people affected by the same phenomena, that it entails experiences of this kind. Bispo only commented that the voices were harsh with him, which could also lead to an interpretation that it was an experience of suffering.