

LES AÇORES DE MADREDEUS / 1995

An exercise in style

“Madredeus is an isolated case, as isolated as the Azores in the middle of the Atlantic.” So says Pedro Ayres Magalhães, one of the founders of the Portuguese group Madredeus, a group that is indeed isolated on the contemporary music scene. Madredeus, which took its name from the Lisbon neighbourhood where it first began performing, renews the traditional Portuguese *fado* (voice, plucked guitar and cello) by rubbing it against Brazilian *bossa nova* and by wrapping the soft, spellbinding voice of Teresa Salgueiro in sonorities that are by turns classical, popular on the accordion and contemporary on the keyboard. Melodious music tinged with *saudade* (the nostalgia, the longing, the hope of which the Portuguese poets sing) but without the sadness of *fado*, its rhythm sustained by the low notes of the cello. Songs written for the Portuguese language, which Magalhães reduces to nouns and a great many vowels, the better to bring out its musicality.



Already enjoying success in Portugal, the group acquired an international reputation after Wim Wenders asked it to compose the original score for his film *Lisbon Story* (1994). At the same time, Rob Rombout was preparing a film that was to be shot in Porto. He too approached Madredeus for the music of his film, but in the end the project was abandoned. The group then proposed that the filmmaker should film its tour of Spain. Rombout refused, for such a film, a pure television product, would have left him at the mercy of a sequence of imposed events and would have forced him to improvise, something he detests. He agreed, however, to make a film about Madredeus on condition that the group be entirely at his disposal for a set period of time, in a place chosen by mutual agreement but far from the recording studios and the concert halls. The choice fell on the Azores, a Portuguese archipelago lost in the middle of the ocean, made up of nine volcanic islands, with the kind of grandiose landscapes Rombout loves and whose local culture, which Magalhães knows well, has preserved very old Portuguese traditions in keeping with what his own songs speak of. Once agreement had been reached (not without difficulty), Rombout felt free to do as he pleased: neither a music film nor

a documentary about the Azores but a cinematic essay associating Madredeus with the popular festivals and traditions that inspire them and with the majestic volcanic landscapes that give visual expression to the beauty of the music. The duality of the subject would be underlined by two different ways of filming: static shots of the landscapes and of the group performing its songs in carefully orchestrated open-air mises en scène; and highly mobile shots, filmed hand-held, to let bloom the vivid colours of the village festivals, of the traditional costumes, of the objects of worship

carried in procession, of the bread and wine being handed out, of the fireworks being set off. Two distinct styles, the one sombre, slow and majestic, the other colourful, restless and joyful. Between the two, calmer sequences would be filmed in a car, with Teresa and Pedro driving around the islands and talking about their work [QR14].



The creative freedom he enjoys allows Rob Rombout to make a film without worrying too much about what he wants to say, since he leaves it to Magalhães and Salgueiro to tell the story of Madredeus and to explain its relationship to the popular culture of the Azores. No further need to look for characters who tell their own story, nor to construct a social discourse as in the previous films. Freed from these concerns, the filmmaker gives himself over to the pleasure of the exercise in style, making radical aesthetic choices and venturing into experiments that surprise even his technical crew. To heighten the pictorial quality of his film, he decides to saturate the colours of the landscapes by placing filters over the camera lens rather than altering them in post-production, thus taking the risk of being unable to go back should the result prove unsatisfactory. For certain sequences staging the full group performing its songs, he draws up a very precise storyboard composed exclusively of wide shots and refuses to let his cameraman shoot the cutaways that would have made the editing easier.

Rombout had been struck by the hieratic theatricality of Madredeus in concert: the musicians in black suits, each on his own platform under a bluish light, and Teresa standing motionless in the foreground. From these concerts he keeps the theatricality, the stillness and the costumes, but he places the group out of doors, in unusual settings. The mise en scène of the song “*A vaca de fogo*” (“The Cow of Fire”) is particularly audacious. It is conceived around the number four. Rombout starts from the tempo of the music, written in four-four time. He chooses a place, at the entrance to a village, where four roads converge and where a wooden post painted white has been planted in the middle of the crossroads. He plans four shots, not one more, each filmed along the axis of one of the four roads. Apart from a few lateral details, the only element common to the four shots is the post, always in the same place in the image, providing a rudimentary continuity of context between the shots. The variations in light implied by the changes of axis are softened with filters that give the atmosphere of the scene a slightly yellow cast and heighten its strangeness. The musicians are placed precisely within the frame, one in the foreground, two seated one behind the other on the right and one on the left, near the post. Except that, with each shot, they change places as in a game of musical chairs. In turn, the musician whose instrument is heard in the foreground of the music takes his place in the foreground of the image. The anchoring of sound and visual elements is reinforced by the editing, which alternates the four shots to the rhythm of the music and according to whether the voice or one instrument prevails over the others. To this sturdy framework, which fully supports the music, Rombout adds a touch of whimsy. Children run laughing in the background, mocking villagers pass between the musicians and, when the music ends, motorbikes drive between the empty chairs. Actions that are by no means fortuitous, of course, and that recall how deeply Madredeus is rooted in Portuguese popular culture [QR16].

Cinema, like music, is an art of time. Barely perceived, its images vanish. “I close my eyes,” Roland Barthes said, “then I open them again, and it is no longer the same image on the screen.” As in his previous films, Rombout makes us see the evanescent substance of cinema. He films two shots whose framing remains fixed, one with figures in it, the other without. A dissolve from one to the other makes the figures gradually disappear from the image [QR19]. The effect is not gratuitous: “Music is a fleeting presence,” says Pedro Ayres Magalhães, insisting on the ephemeral pleasure it produces. But the real problem is not the fleetingness of





music, it is its *presence*, the presence one unfailingly feels at a concert, when one is enveloped by it. Cinema, the art of projected images (images thrown *forward*), can only with difficulty convey that presence, even with the sophisticated means of Dolby sound. Subterfuges have to be found. Rombout films a pretty little road lined with hydrangeas. We hear the sound of a car going past, but we do not see it. The car recedes into the distance, the shot remains fixed. We have not seen the car, but we have felt its presence.

For the song “*Maio maduro Maio*”, Rombout takes the group onto the steep slope of a hill covered in volcanic ash. This is the *Ponta dos Capelinhos*, on the island of Faial, whose summit rises in the background, cutting a graceful curve against the cloudy sky. The musicians are arranged in a triangle. The shots follow one another to the rhythm of the music. The first shows only the guitarist at the apex of the triangle, who begins the piece; the second widens the previous one by adding the second guitarist to the left of the first; the third shot reveals the cellist to the right of the first two, at the moment he begins to play; finally, the fourth shot shows the five musicians and Teresa, framed from the chest up in the foreground, as she starts to sing. The progressive widening of the frame then continues in a surprising way: the group, isolated on the dark, desolate slope, is filmed from the side of the opposite hill. Taken from further away still, in an extreme long shot, the last shot shows the tiny group, lost in the immensity of the volcanic landscape [QR16].

One may well wonder what moves the filmmaker to devise such a *mise en scène*. The song was composed by a Portuguese poet, José Afonso. It speaks of a certain revolt, of an awakening of the senses, says Teresa, which she compares to the awakening of spring in the month of May. But on

the black slope covered in ash, no flower grows, no bird sings, nothing evokes the spring. Only the music emerges from this lunar territory, and with it the hope that it carries. The landscape, grandiose but disquieting, tenebrous, almost apocalyptic, is the telluric ground on which these words could blossom and awaken our senses.

According to a local legend recounted by a young poet, a friend of Teresa's, the Azores are said to be the remains of ancient Atlantis, the lost continent whose grim fate is recounted by Plato. The two great rocks that rise offshore are said to be all that survives of the wall of the ancient city swallowed up by the waves. "The sea is the infinite and also the gaze upon the infinite; it is the total acceptance of the dream. You can go on looking at the sea and imagining whatever you want. You can even remember whatever you want. Perhaps it is in that sense that you can also speak of nostalgia," says Teresa facing the sea, of which she sings in "*Ao longe o mar*" ("The Sea in the Distance") [QR17].

From the sea, from the infinite that she contemplates, come the dream, the memory, the nostalgia for distant times. With her, Rob Rombout's camera contemplates the dark ocean, the waves that erode the reefs, the age-old volcanoes lost in the clouds that form and dissolve at the whim of the wind. The landscapes of the Azores, whose beauty overwhelms us, speak of time immemorial, of the ephemeral nature of things and of what remains once they have vanished, stirring in the depths of our being a *saudade* that is nonetheless not our own. Such is the power of the encounter between the landscape and the music, which take us out of ourselves and carry us far away, beyond the clouds, into the infinite [QR15]. *Les Açores de Madredeus* is a romantic film that reminds us that, like music, like cinema, landscape is an art of time.





COMMENTS

❑ The Azores are an archipelago; the film is the portrait of a group, Madredeus, whom I had asked to write music for a film about Porto that in the end never got made (production in Portugal sometimes feels like quicksand).

There were six of them, including the singer, Teresa Salgueiro, and the leader and composer, Pedro Ayres Magalhães.

They suggested I make a film about them instead, and France Supervision (France 2 & 3) showed interest in the idea of a film in 16:9, a format that was beginning to take hold.

It wasn't really a commission, more a project to work on together.

❑ The group was planning a tour of the Iberian peninsula. I went to one of their concerts in Amsterdam, I met them, we chatted a while. Following a tour, following artists in general, being at their mercy: that was the very opposite

of what I wanted. I wrote a script. They didn't like it.

I wanted to shoot in the Azores: I had the idea of a *road movie* through the islands, built around two characters (Teresa and Pedro). That didn't convince them either. But when I added that, for my part, I could just as well not make the film, that I had no need of it, they came round to my proposal, and I had a free hand... for ten days. They were stuck on an island, and therefore available at any moment, which allowed me to produce a more constructed piece of work.

I got EMI (their label) to let me choose the music, and not to limit myself to promoting an album.

❑ We had to decide which language to use. They were thinking of English, as in the film *Lisbon Story* (1994, Wim Wenders), in which they had appeared, but they spoke it rather badly, whereas their French seemed perfect to me. I settled it: for direct-sound takes, they



would speak French, and when we worked with *voice-over* – with better sound quality – about more personal, more intimate matters, they would speak Portuguese (I speak little of it), but everything that would be said would have been decided in advance. That's my directive side, not very nice really. Niceness is for afterwards, once the film is finished. They looked at me as if I were a Martian; they were used to being followed, not directed.

□ Their concert staging had a very theatrical side – all in black, no greeting, very little movement – that I wanted to keep, and to transpose into a real landscape. I was looking for very theatrical, even pictorial images. Possibly by using a filter on the lens, which is something I will never do again. Admittedly, it lets you see the effect directly while shooting, but you can no longer change anything at all in post-production. It is irreversible. In this film, there is no intervention on the image whatsoever in post-production. But being

confronted with my own choices is something I rather like.

We added artificial light. It comes from nowhere and reinforces the pictorial, artificial effect.

And so that the landscape would look even more theatrical (some people thought I had shot in a studio), we fixed weights to the tripod, so that nothing would move, even if there was wind.

□ While scouting locations, I had found a fairly nondescript spot where I felt like organising a sequence. A crossroads, four streets, a huge, hideous lamp post. The song "*A vaca de fogo*" is in four-four time. Four roads and four beats.

I wanted to do something we have always been taught not to do: go from one wide shot to another wide shot without passing through a close-up... the rule they teach in film schools. But the huge post was in the way and there was no way of removing it.



So I planned four shots, each with a different background, each with a different musician in the foreground, in the same proportions, and the post always in the same place in the image. When the group arrived... I had forgotten there were six of them! That didn't suit me at all. For this sequence, I had to leave out the keyboard player Carlos Maria Trindade and the guitarist José Peixoto.

❑ In each shot, the singer is standing and the musicians are seated. To keep the proportions and to be at the same height, they were perched on crates. To arrive in the end at an image that looks perfectly natural, you sometimes have to go through utterly artificial procedures.

❑ The sequences staged in a theatrical manner alternate abruptly, in hard cuts, with those shot in a more natural way, with the camera on the shoulder, during a village festival.

❑ Could you today, in a film about a musical group, settle for long static shots that go on and on? Wouldn't rapid changes of image be required?

CREDITS

Written and directed by: Rob Rombout.

Director of photography: Jean-Paul Dezaytijd.

Sound design and sound recording: Paul Heymans.

Assistant director: Olga Baillif.

Editing: Adriana Moreira de Oliveira.

Sound editing and mix: Jean-François Gosselin.

Executive producer: Mona Lisa Films (Jean-Paul Puljiz, Thierry Dory).

Producer: Morgane Production (Gérard Lacroix, Gérard Pont).

Production: Morgane Production – Mona Lisa Films – União Lisboa – France Supervision.

Co-production: RTBF (Benoît Jacques de Dixmude, Roch Bosquée), with the support of the 16:9 Action Plan of the European Union.

Format: Beta-digit 16:9.

Running time: 40 minutes.











