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Self-representation and Intermediality in *The Metamorphosis of Birds* (Catarina Vasconcelos, 2020)

Abstract: *The Metamorphosis of Birds* (Catarina Vasconcelos, 2020, Portugal) is a hybrid non-fiction film in which the director represents herself and the members of her immediate family, who are an extension of her, in an intermedial and deliberately lyrical fashion. Starting with Bill Nichols's performative modality of documentary, the article will shed light on how the metaphorical network that links mother (roots and growth), father (life and death) and birds (freedom and creativity) in the film is developed in connection to the filmmaker and her existence, in a profoundly personal and intimate manner. This performative autobiographical stance exists midway between the real and the fictional, i.e., in fully autofictional territory. Permeated with autobiographical details but resorting to imagination, the film seems to be a combination of both "biographical" and "specular" autofiction according to Luz Elena Herrera Zamudio (2007), presupposing lyricism, on the one hand, and reversibility between the real and the imaginary, on the other. Mirroring is the core performative act which demonstrates that the creator is an integral part of her work (film as text) and vice versa.

Keywords: Self-representation, autofiction, autobiography, documentary, *The Metamorphosis of Birds*, Catarina Vasconcelos.

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Introduction: Female self-representation

The Metamorphosis of Birds (*A Metamorfose dos Pássaros*, 2020, Portugal) is the first feature of Portuguese director Catarina Vasconcelos, after her equally intimate and poetic film *Metaphor or Sadness Inside Out* (*Metáfora ou a Tristeza Virada do Averso*, 2014, 32 minutes long) with which she started her adventure in self-representation and in cinema, or in cinema as a form of self-representation.

For someone with a formal higher education in visual arts – obtained at the Fine Arts Academy of the University of Lisbon, in Portugal, and the Royal College of Art in London, in the United Kingdom – Catarina Vasconcelos is also an expert in the use of words, masterfully creating linguistical-pictorial metaphors. Due to the poetic style she adopts, her self-representation is even more ambiguous than usual in non-fiction cinema. Her presence is made palpable not only in body but also in spirit – the reverse of the physical body where the *feeling* that emanates from one’s entrails resides (more specifically in the heart, source of love; in the brain, *locus* of thinking; and the eyes, the entrance point of things which become deposits of memories). It is probably not a coincidence that Aristotle remitted the soul to a vague, almost indeterminate place of the being, connected to the understanding and the imagination like the physical body itself (*De Anima*, originally 350 B.C. [2010, 34]). For Aristotle, body and soul were inseparable, because “all the affections of the soul are connected with the body” (34, my translation). Thus, self-representation may be considered both an external and an internal phenomenon, and Vasconcelos fully embraces this position in her poetic stance and metaphorical associations.

In fact, this double component of Catarina Vasconcelos’s film transforms *The Metamorphosis of Birds* into a metaphor of her own life, presented in a lyrical manner not directly consistent with a single art form, but rather on cordial terms with a cluster of them (literature, painting, theatre, and music). It is through intermediality – in a hybrid intersection of sensibilities and materialities – that the self-representation of “Catarina”, as the filmmaker calls herself in the film, operates. In the footsteps of the celebrated Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa, who *wrote* with words only, Vasconcelos proves that films can be poetry, not relinquishing their category of cinema because the two art forms are both governed by metaphors, manifesting *in between* fabulations and through them. I feel that directing films on oneself, springing from oneself, is the most genuine poetic gesture. As Pessoa once wrote in the poem “Auto-psychography” (“Autopsicografia”, 1932), “The poet is a faker / Who’s so good at his act / He even fakes the pain / Of pain he feels in fact”.¹ Appropriately, *The Metamorphosis of Birds* is a filmed bereavement, a mourning film so to

1 Taken from the website *Poetry International*: https://www.poetryinternational.com/en/poets-poems/poems/poem/103-7088_AUTOPSYCHOGRAPHY. Accessed August 13, 2023.

speak, which transcends death to impose itself as a film-poem² charged with symbols and involving other art forms.

The film is usually perceived by the spectators as being rather abstract and fragmented. As a non-fiction film, it contains no story to speak of; but there is also no voice of God commentary and no factual internal logic, which may be confusing for some viewers. Its backbone is the poetic text that permeates it entirely, in a polyphony of voices over, belonging to several social actors in the same family: Catarina, her father (Jacinto) as an adult, and her grandfather (Henrique) in his old age, all voicing themselves; the grandfather in his younger days (then a naval officer), and the mother (Ana Maria Pinto) as a figment of Catarina's imagination in one of the film's sequences, both played by voice actors. There are also female voice-overs reading letters, further contributing to this polyphony. Most of the film has no dialogue, the exception being the odd reenacted scene. The grandmother, Beatriz or just Triz, is omnipresent, but is played by an actress and does not speak.³ The images and sounds are relevant to the contents of the voice-overs, but they may – and indeed often do – consist of metaphorical associations, rather than direct illustrations thereof. Thus, the film is above all symbolical, open to interpretation more than is usual in non-fiction cinema. Although the general tone and the voice-overs are consistent throughout, as is the directorial style, the biographical content is separated into two parts. The first half of the film focuses on Vasconcelos's grandmother and her father's life as a child and a young adult; the second part is about the director's own loss and thus focuses on her own mother, who died when she was a teenager.

In what follows I will approach two subjects that are completely interweaved in the film, but which I will – for the sake of clarity – separate into two different sections: intermediality and self-representation. The film's symbolical network will serve as a starting point and will, possibly, contaminate the language of my own text, more poetical than usual for an article of this kind. Film analysis will be blended with the theoretical discourse on both subjects.

Pure hybridity, or the *inside* that is perceived outside

Self-representation produced through cinema, a versatile art form which combines many traits of the art forms that preceded it, tends naturally towards self-reflexivity, the forerunner

2 Subjective cinema (also known as cinema of the self) may have a restorative function, being often used in many situations connected with loss. Alain Bergala claims that “first person films may assign reality to an intimate dialogue with the vanished” (2008: 28, my translation).

3 Vasconcelos's uncles and aunt, her father's siblings, are played by actors as children and appear as themselves at their older, current ages.

of intermediality, as I claim elsewhere (Chinita 2022). Yet, in Vasconcelos's feature this is fully assumed and maintained through a comparison between the organic and artistic realms. Both partake of the symbolic act of *in-forming*, here connoted with embodiment.

One of the many voice-overs that permeate the film, and transform it into a polyphonic opus, claims that even before reaching adolescence “the bodies of [Beatriz's] children could no longer endure their tight frames”, feeling compressed like the banks of rivers.⁴ This organic becoming – which causes literal growing pains in one of the children – is contrasted with pictorial figures immobilised forever in their frames, such as *The Peasant Wedding* (1567, by Peter Bruegel the Elder) [Figure 1], or the detail of the Virgin Mary's face in George de La Tour's painting *The Newborn Child* (1645–1648) [Figure 2]. Both images are thematically related to the film.



Fig. 1. *The Peasant Wedding*⁵



Fig. 2. Detail of *The Newborn Child*

The semantic transfer becomes more than metaphorical when old Henrique comments, in voice-over, that the reproduction of Joaquín Sorolla's painting, which shows a mother lying in bed with a newborn [Figure 3], had always felt to him like his wife with one of their own children. Later, the film presents us with a photograph of Ana Maria Pinto, Catarina's mother, in her hospital bed after having given birth to the film director, in a trans-generational echo of Sorolla's reproduction [Figure 4]. Symbolically, in *The Metamorphosis of Birds* breaking the limits of the body is synonymous with stepping out of the frame, in a commixture of art forms.

Likewise, pouring to the outside that which lies within reveals a combination of artistic genres in which visuality prevails. Apparently turned outwards, in that it shows the

⁴ All quotations of the film are from the original version consulted; the translation is mine.

⁵ All images from this article are withdrawn from the film *The Metamorphosis of the Birds* and their original aspect ratio was respected. Kindly provided by the production company A Primeira Idade @.

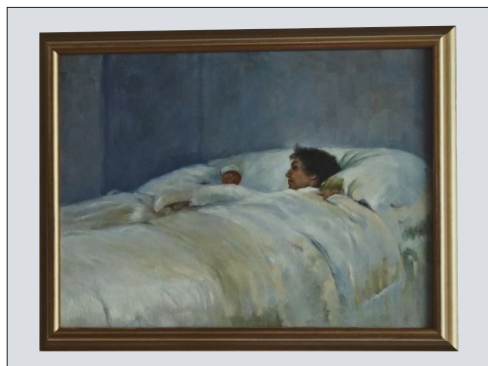


Fig. 3. Sorolla's reproduction



Fig. 4. The first photograph with Catarina

house's garden, the mountain range, the forest, and the high seas – in short, all of nature – *The Metamorphosis of Birds* is, however, about the inner self of people – that of the film director Catarina and the two generations of family members that preceded her. Henrique, the grandfather, “looked inside Beatriz” and foresaw in her their future together and the possibility to raise a family; just as he would “look inside the photographs” Beatriz sent him across the sea, as the years went by. These memories of familial history, belonging to the intimacy of a man and a woman that “happened” to be Catarina’s grandparents, as she says in the film (in voice-over), are made public, but always from the director’s creative point of view. In a way, they are also hers, and about her. Like the mountains whose colossal size “penetrated [Catarina’s] narrow eyes as if they saw her from within”, so too the photographs return the onlookers their own gaze and replicate it, enlarged, as is the case with Henrique when, aboard his navy ship, he observes the photographs of his small children, enlarging each detail with the help of a magnifying glass [Figure 5].



Fig. 5. Henrique's first-born

The gaze is endowed with a very positive meaning in this film. It is not a coincidence that Henrique, upon deciding to enter a nursing home, asks his already grown-up children to take him Santa Luzia's Eyes, a silvery wall ornament, so that vision would never forsake him, even if only to see his wife in his memories, as he claims [Figure 6]. Inversely, feeling is invested with a negative meaning. Most often, it is equated with suffering, befitting the subject of mourning.⁶

⁶ The flagrant exception is the falling in love of one of the boys (Zé).

However, in truth, both factors are equivalent. *The Metamorphosis of Birds* is a film of specific realities and feelings traversed by art. Hence, vision is just the “inside out”, or reverse, of feeling. Reversibility is one of the film’s leitmotifs, relevant in other aspects as well, as I will stress later in this article.

The film’s intermediality is linked to its own *documental* dynamics, in the sense of statement, rather than evidence of any reality whatsoever – which is usually considered the main feature of non-fictional films and a means to register facts for posterity. Catarina Vasconcelos does not wish to address social issues through her connection to the world, as is typical of the essay film genre, as Timothy Corrigan (2011) explains: “Essayistic thinking thus becomes a conceptual, figural, phenomenological, and representational remaking of a self as it encounters, tests, and experiences some version of the real as a public ‘elsewhere’” (Corrigan 35). In *The Metamorphosis of Birds* there is no contact with people, places, and situations extraneous to the core family, nor a conceptual argument of whatever kind; the emotions portrayed relate strictly to the family sphere.

For the character Catarina,⁷ the external world is restricted to Nature – depicted either as a verdurous Mother, cradle of humanity (possibly the best “mother of mothers of all the mothers” which the film contains, and the verbal refrain highlights), or as the vast sea that engulfs all, in death and rebirth alike. Except for the occasional reference to Africa – in the grandfather’s stamp collection of former Portuguese colonies, or in Teresa’s protest song – together with the mentioning of the dictator Salazar’s fall, on the cover page of a magazine read by Beatriz, no information is imparted about the social reality of the times. The film contains no social actors beyond the direct sphere of the family; even Zé’s girlfriend and the ever-present housekeeper Zulmira, both played by actresses, are intimately related to it. The crew of the Portuguese naval training ship *Sagres*, seen on several occasions, is a synecdoche of all seamanship; and the “so-desired” correspondence sent to the crew aboard Henrique’s ship, during his commissions, is a filmmaker’s fabrication read by a choir of female voice-overs, in a polyphony with a universal point of view: “the craft of nostalgia” (“*o ofício da saudade*”), as Henrique calls it. The film takes place in a sort of artistic bell jar that shuns any foreign reality.



Fig. 6. The gaze of Henrique in his old age, opening the film

7 From now on, I will refer to “Catarina” when mentioning the self-represented author and use her last name (“Vasconcelos”) when reporting on her authorial decisions.

Thus, the type of *documentation* that Catarina Vasconcelos opts for is intensely performative. When Jacinto urges Catarina to free herself of the weight of existence, in an entirely metaphorical exchange between father and daughter, he tells her: “Take my memories, take me with you; take time along with you”. At that point an arm removes a green curtain laterally, as if in a theatrical performance, with the only difference that this spectacle is turned towards life – specifically the landscape of Serra da Estrela, the highest mountain range in Portugal – and not a theatre house [Figure 7].⁸

Contrary to, for example, *Les plages d’Agnès* (2008), in which the filmmaker Varda represents herself acting opposite her younger self, in a reflection on other periods of her life, in *The Metamorphosis of Birds* there is no coexistence of different ontological strata (i.e., author and reenacted persona) in the same art object. The film is performative but is not an essay film. In fact, it evades any categorisation. The representation of Jacinto’s childhood and adolescence in the family home with his mother, his siblings, and the loyal housemaid Zulmira is carried out by actors only. Since (grand)mother Beatriz had passed away many years before the film was produced and all the children had grown into middle age, this is the only possible representation of what is now only imprinted in memory [Figure 8].



Fig. 7. The curtain that is drawn to reveal the spectacle of nature (at home)



Fig. 8. Reenactment performed by actors (the gaze at the camera heightens the falsehood)

Later, in the second part of the film, Catarina acts opposite her deceased mother, in a sequence which is her own account of a dream she had. Thus, the fictitious dialogue between Catarina and her progenitor is uttered by a single physical voice, that of Catarina. Had an actress been selected to play the part of the mother, this would result in an impossible conjunction in

8 Later in the film, the same arm removes yet another curtain, this time in Henrique and Beatriz’s family house, revealing an exuberant vegetation, symptom of the so-called “verticality of the plants” which had always been present in Triz.

which the creator would coexist with her own psychic creation – indeed, a clear case of figural metalepsis of the author, per Gérard Genette, in which the supposed creator physically enters her own work.⁹ During this narrated dialogue, in voice-over, the image shows Catarina’s hand interacting with foliage in reverse, metaphorically making time recede in an expression of personal longing. The supposed dialogue ends with Catarina walking away from a tree trunk, revealing a heart made of red petals deposited there, in a metaphorical filial tribute. This manufacture is a blend of poetic text, editing and imagination.

Therefore, the film contains a performative autobiographic dimension, encompassing both real and imaginary acts, in the line of the performative documentary modality proposed by Bill Nichols in a recent edition of his canonical monography *Introduction to Documentary* (2001). All of Vasconcelos’s enactments in this film convey a personal experience – be it as revelation of memories, as emotional involvement, or personal belief – denoting a subjective and affective vision of the world, as Nichols puts it. Two examples of performative acts in *The Metamorphosis of Birds* are the moment when, on the high seas, a sailor writes the sentence “My love, my home at sea” with the aid of the ship’s light signalling system [Figure 9]; or one of the rare scenes without a voice-over, in which Catarina unsuccessfully tries to lift a fallen tree, on the mountain top on a foggy day, to the melancholy sound of Bach’s *Chaconne for violin*, whose purpose, according to Jacinto elsewhere, is both to evoke the dead and to raise them [Figure 10].



Fig. 9. Sailor aboard the ship *Sagres*



Fig. 10. Catarina trying to lift up her mother

The Metamorphosis of Birds contains two recurring types of enactment, diametrically opposed: one occurs in the first part of the film, the other is apparent in the second half. Both

⁹ It should be noted, however, that Genette’s theory of metalepsis was conceived with fictional literature in mind, and *The Metamorphosis of Birds* is a hybrid film that is not entirely fictional. I will come back to this point later in the article.

are consciously intermedial and may be perceived as indirect statements on the nature of art. The former contains a funereal element of stagnation and involuntary freezing; the latter is characterised by movement and deliberate freedom. Indeed, after the death of their mother, all of Beatriz's children remain alone in the family house and are seen in a stylised open shot [Figure 11]. This framing is composed as a *tableau vivant*, just like the high society form of entertainment widespread in some European countries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Back then, real people posed in group as pictorial figures, imitating famous



Fig. 11. *Tableau vivant* of the siblings

paintings. In the above case in point, the siblings are static, but not for the delectation of beholders; they look like an artwork, and yet their pose expresses bereavement above all else. Due to their artificial distribution in space and immobility, their stance may be considered performative. As narrated, in voice-over, by Jacinto as a young adult: “[...] we were a still life. We observed the world as if we were inside a painting, outside of which life insisted on going on”. This comment seems appropriate to the *tableau vivant* in the wider shot. However, the scene contains

three closer shots which precede that one and are, in fact, cut-ins thereof: a neck vein throbbing discretely, a suspended motionless arm, and a hand holding a smoking cigarette in abandonment. Although the editing disrupts the integrity of the scene, assisted by the character's micro-movements, the overall effect is minimalist and combines volumetric performativity with the visual immobility typical of painting, fusing several art forms and their respective attributes into just one (cinema).

Significantly, this visual composition frames a metaphorical interior death in relation to an external one (the mother's).¹⁰ Such an image rhymes, artistically, with several other shots in the film which deliberately resemble *still lives*, paintings which depict a cluster of edible and drinkable items disposed on a table. We know these have been purposely shot for Vasconcelos's film – that, hence, they are staged cinematic facts – because in the very first of those occurrences [Figure 12], Zulmira exits the shot frame right, after having picked up a quince (that she will peel in the next, closer shot).

¹⁰ The same happens in the lengthy shot in which Teresa is seated at the piano and remains motionless without her fingers roaming across the keys in a musical performance, although piano music is audible in the soundtrack.

In the second part of the film, Catarina herself plays the lead in the main *performances*, which work as dynamic occurrences. In one of them, we first see her assembling a puzzle which (re)constitutes a woman's face in close-up [Figure 13]; later she wanders across the peaks of the Serra da Estrela mountains with a fluttering flag with the same image printed on it, which we may presume to be Grandmother Beatriz's face, or her own mother, but is possibly a representation of all the mothers [Figure 14]. The director's agency, the episodic nature of the event – which does not contain a story but does not evade a physical progression – and the public tribute involved are reminiscent of a 1960s Happening, a planned event placed in between performative and visual arts and incorporating spontaneity to the point of making it virtually unrepeatable.



Fig. 12. Still life (after Zulmira exits the frame)



Fig. 13. The assembling of the puzzle...



Fig. 14. ... and its public exhibition

In this circumstance there is no direct participation by an (intrafilmic) audience, as was the case with the happenings developed by Allan Kaprow from 1959 onwards, but the performance is staged for the cinematic audience, validating the act as a ritual of mourning. The extemporaneous arrival of a flag on the mountaintop seems to endow this act with a certain spontaneity which, however, is entirely fabricated because – let us not forget – the puzzle was assembled first, and the waiving of the flag was scripted. Therefore, this performance is doubly hybrid because not only does it take place inside a film, but it also merges with the cinematic processes itself. Also, Vasconcelos uses Bill Nichols's performative documentary modality but goes further than him by endowing it with a supplementary hybridity which points to an interior and intimate recess rather than to an outward space.

On another occasion, Catarina blends with the verdurous landscape via the use of mirrors which reflect ‘this side’ of space while concealing her in full view in the off-frame space of the background, one of the six modalities of off-frame established by Noël Burch in the article “Nana, or the Two Kinds of Space” (originally 1973). Consequently, there is a coalescence of the visible and the invisible, of that which is in front and that which is behind, in a process of adulteration of reality reminiscent of René Magritte’s paintings. However, unlike the Belgian painter, Catarina does not extend nature to the artefact (as in one of the paintings in Magritte’s series *The Human Condition*, 1933)¹¹ nor does she use the mirror in a not-reversible way (as in *Not to Be Reproduced*, 1937).¹² She opts for a combination of the exact opposite of these two strategies: she extends the artefact to nature camouflaging it (and herself) in the middle of the landscape, simultaneously revealing and hiding the specular dimension. This performance works as a sort of artistic installation which does justice to Grandmother Beatriz’s prayer: “Give me the ability to be my reverse”.



Figs. 15 and 16. ‘This side of space’ or the (in)visible inner frame

Notwithstanding the film’s intrinsic performativity, it is therefore the creative component that Catarina considers more important in *The Metamorphosis of Birds*. In the scene in which Jacinto is seen (re)reading the film’s script, Catarina comments, in voice-over:

Dad, on the day you read the script of this film you said: “There are things here which did not happen exactly like this”.

I answered: “And what is the problem if they didn’t happen exactly like that? They really could have”.

11 See, for example, the website *Pinterest* (<https://www.pinterest.pt/>).

12 <https://www.pinterest.pt/pin/490048003184011973/>

The poetic freedom of the representation, even when the filmmaker is self-represented in the film, is duly contemplated in Bill Nichols's performative documentary modality. Yet in *The Metamorphosis of Birds*, Vasconcelos does not appear as a filmmaker at work, but rather as a daughter (and granddaughter). Although there is an indication in the text that she has directed, at least, this film, we ignore the context of its production, the nature of the shooting process (whose recording apparatuses and crew are never seen throughout), and everything else connected with it. It is as if the film has been more imagined than produced; the inner realm prevails over the external realistic one. Her father's name, as he says in the film, is not even Jacinto but rather Henrique, like his father before him.

Hence, although the film contains circumstances which do not match the reality of the facts, these discrepancies are not conveyed as lies but rather as fabulations *based on* the truth. In other words, they are conveyed as creative freedom. *The Metamorphosis of Birds* is a film facing inwards, towards an (almost) entirely subjective world woven with metaphors and symbols, highly lyrical. It is a hybrid film of an *artistic* performative nature, combining reality and fiction as its fundamental constitutive material and not as mere ornament. As the birds say in their language, seen in intertitles in the film: "Whenever you don't remember... invent".

Speculum: The I that reflects itself

Although it contains assumed fabulations, *The Metamorphosis of Birds* is a crucial film in what concerns self-representation. Vasconcelos and her father appear in the film in body and voice, though the genitor's first name was apparently changed so as not to be confused with Vasconcelos's grandfather, who was also called Henrique, as mentioned by Catarina, in voice-over. Aunt Teresa and uncles Pedro, Nuno, João and José are also seen in the film as themselves – that is, as they were at the time of film production – in a ritual scene highly charged with feeling: the burning, in a bonfire, of their parents' love letters to each other, as requested by the old Henrique before his death. The end credits confirm their real-life identities, as well as that of Henrique, whose eyes seen in close up open the film, a detail captured before he passed away. The biological Beatriz, "Jacinto's" mother, and Ana Maria Pinto, "Catarina's", are seen in photographs only, as are their children, either in infancy or as newborns. In this sense, and considering the documentary nature of the film, it would be logical to consider it an autobiography.

However, *The Metamorphosis of Birds* is not an autobiographical film in a narrow and literal sense, notwithstanding the *sine qua non* condition advocated by Elizabeth W. Bruss (1976) and Philippe Lejeune (1996) being here – apparently – met, at least as far as

the film director is concerned.¹³ Indeed, there is absolute nominal coincidence between the director (Catarina Vasconcelos), the narrator (the director-scriptwriter's point of view expressed through multiple voice-overs, including her own biological voice) and the main character ("Catarina"). This shared identity, more than the use of the personal pronoun "I" (corresponding to the first-person singular) is what, according to Lejeune in his first approach to the matter, enables the reader to recognise the work as an intentional account on the author's part, distinguishing it at once from other neighbouring genres of subjective literature. Indeed, the use of this nominal conjunction in the case of cinema – which is a very different medium from literature – was the object of Lejeune's own attention in 2008. The theorist concluded that not only does autobiographical cinema exist, but it seems "to be condemned to *fiction*" (*Cine y autobiografía* 18; my translation, emphasis in the original). Writing, being composed of abstract signs, does not have a direct connection to a referent, but cinema, being *mostrative*, does – which is why it necessarily resorts to evocations and reenactments to convey the past. The most obvious exceptions, according to Lejeune himself, are the use of photographs and voice-over commentaries. Hence, subjective cinema (that is, cinema of the Self) cannot, due to its own material existence, tell the truth and nothing but the truth, unless there is a temporal simultaneity between the situations of living and filming, something which Lejeune considers to be autobiographical as well. An example of this would be Alain Cavalier's work *Le Filmeur* (2005), in which the director's self-representation focuses on his own banal, everyday existence (Harvey 2), not shying away from his own physical decadence. In other words, Lejeune hesitates between a more restricted perception of autobiography and a wider conception of it (as in the case of cinema), in which narration takes place in the present instead of the past, changing the work's dynamics. This becomes obvious in *The Metamorphosis of Birds*.

Vasconcelos is the general narrator because she enunciates the whole film through her own cinematic choices as a director and as the sole author of the script. She also narrates in voice-over, but these more circumscribed oral accounts are situated at the same level of all other voice-overs, as part of the polyphony that characterises the film and plays an important part in its poetic nature, as already mentioned. Although Vasconcelos is seen and heard in the film, she only appears, in voice and body, in the second part of the opus, and nevertheless ambiguously. Indeed, she never mentions her surname and nearly avoids her activity as a filmmaker, of which there are only two brief references without any material evidence to support them. In factual terms, "Catarina" is as much an enigma as her own mother. We know her father is called Henrique (and not Jacinto) and that she lost her

¹³ It should be mentioned, though, that Lejeune himself does not reject exceptions to his own rule of identity coincidence (Lejeune, *Le pacte*, 28–30).

mother at the age of seventeen;¹⁴ all other personal aspects pertain to her family and their veracity is somewhat dubious.

The poetic experience of Catarina's world, and of the members of her family whose destiny is directly connected to hers, thus overrides, like a corporeal and emotional *inscription*, the aridity of the facts whose detailed chronology is, in fact, omitted. Dates are generally avoided in this film, as if people hovered in a mythical or universal time – appropriate for a film which is an ode to the feminine through the concept of maternity. “In mothers’ hands there is always sleep and there is always time”, claims Jacinto, in voice-over. Although they perish physically, mothers are always present, suffering a metamorphosis when they pass away. As an archetype, the mother is also omnipresent in this film, which points to “the mothers of all the mothers, and the mothers’ mothers of all the mothers” until the limits of one’s imagination are reached. The film contains a recurrent reference to “the beginning of times”, in which, presumably, there was Zulmira (the housekeeper), and Triz (the mother, head of the family), who is connoted with water, source of universal life in both poetical and mystical terms.¹⁵ Early in the film, a voice-over tells us, in almost biblical terms, that water came first, and was then followed by roots – which give rise to “trees”, here connoted with the development of life and the constitution of family – and finally by birds – in this context symbolising freedom and the offspring. It is the destiny of children to learn how to speak the language of birds, which artistically amounts to expressing oneself freely.

This metaphorical network undermines the filmic autobiography in a more restricted sense. In this copious symbolical context, it is worth stressing that the biological mother is absent. It is in this gap that intermediality plays a key role. When the film was produced, Grandmother Beatriz had already died; she was “a ghost”, as imparted in a voice-over. Therefore, Triz is only present in the film through performative acts which are either mnesic reenactments or wistful fantasies. Triz is a *version* of herself as much as Catarina is: a character in someone else’s fiction – firstly the older son’s (and possibly the rest of the siblings) and then the granddaughter’s. She does not exist and possibly never existed as presented in the film, but she could... because, as Catarina says, in voice-over, when not knowing, one invents. If one has metaphorical wings propelled by the imagination, that is. Not coincidentally, Vasconcelos attributes to her own mother the sentence “Catarina, it will be beautiful to see you fly”. Yet, she never did see this. In fact, the second mother of the film, the director’s genitor, is a mystery just like her daughter. Our knowledge of her is limited to her untimely death (due to cancer), her name and, eventually, a job. Other traits, mentioned by Catarina, such as her liking to

14 In her previous film, she mentions that she is two years younger than her brother and that it was he who lost their mother at seventeen...

15 Just like the seahorse, seen and mentioned in the film, a hippocampus container of memories and a species in which it is up to the male to give birth.

bake cakes on Sundays, become hypotheticals, because of the way that they are conveyed in a vocalic and poetic sequence of alternated exchanges between father and daughter.

As a social actor, Ana Maria is, therefore, mainly an absence, signalled only in an old photograph and in a poetic dialogue imagined by her daughter Catarina. Interestingly, the maternal absence is the most consistent biographical information contained in the whole film, around which everything else revolves. Indeed, Catarina, in voice-over, observes: “Grandma, when I was born your absence already occupied a lot of space, but I couldn’t feel it. When my mother died, my father and I found each other in the absence of the word mother”. Yet, if the veracity of the biographical facts in *The Metamorphosis of Birds* is questionable, the same cannot be claimed of its experience, precisely because it takes place at the level of self-representation. Catarina’s presence in the film is the crucial factor responsible for the hybridity of this singular object, situated in between worlds and genres.¹⁶ Because of the film’s relationship with painting, her presence could be perceived as a gesture of self-portraiture – one of the possible spheres of self-representation, and furthermore imbued with a creative and fragmentary form permeated with poetic meditations.

For Michel Beaujour, the self-portrait is not meant to be the report of an entire life, or a part thereof – as argued by, among others, Raymond Bellour in 1988 – but rather the representation of an essence: “I will not tell you what I have done, but What I Am, instead” (Beaujour 9, my translation). The title of his written work *Miroirs d’encre* (literally *Mirrors of ink*) points to a more diffuse mirroring, which is perfectly in accordance with literature. In cinema, however, the visibility of the recorded people, objects and places changes the process, as already mentioned. For example, Marie-Françoise Grange (2008) believes that the self-portrait is a mosaic of materials which is characterised by a manifest lack of action and story in the traditional meaning of the term (i.e., storytelling). She conceives of it as being entirely performative because it represents the subject in the present and during his/her life, as a performance that is enacted in front of the spectators. However, a self-portrait often represents a filmmaker as a film professional – as Grange claims – being entirely organised around a person, contrary to what happens in the self-representation, which tends to be sparser throughout a film.¹⁷

16 This relationship is constant and simultaneous: the autobiographical pact coexists with the novelistic pact, or, in other words, the autobiography fiction (Wagner-Egelhaaf 32).

17 Cecilia Sayad’s book, *Performing Authorship: Self-inscription and Corporeality in the Cinema* (2013), whose title is very suggestive for this subject, contains an approach to the cinematic self-portrait which depends entirely on the “authors” assuming themselves as such, that is, as filmmakers who are seen working. This generates a *mise en abyme* of the creator, and a very objective depiction of technical mirroring (the disclosure of the apparatus), albeit possibly counterfeited, as in Orson Welles’s *F for Fake*. Likewise, the category of “refractive cinema” proposed by Timothy Corrigan

Although some of the characteristics of the self-portrait do take place in *The Metamorphosis of Birds*, this cinematic subgenre is insufficient to explain Vasconcelos's film, in which there are features that gravitate towards the fictional. Serge Doubrovsky, on the back cover of his novel *Fils*, in 1977, defined autofiction as "A fiction [i.e., a literary narrative] of events and facts strictly real", in which "the language of an adventure" is entrusted to "the adventure of a language" (qtd. Gasparini 12, my translation). Put another way, the form and the creative boldness involved surpass the mere report, shaping it in favour of a better artistic result. Thus, the freedom of its enunciation causes autofiction to differ from the traditional autobiography. According to Gasparini, autofiction makes known *another truth*, perforce historical and scattered throughout several narrations within the work (15, my translation, emphasis in the original).

Developed for literature, the term autofiction (synonymous with self-fiction) gained traction and spread to other fields, namely the audiovisual art forms. Its singularity is generally acknowledged, although the theorists agree to disagree on a definition (Vilain, 2020; Wagner-Egelhaaf, 2022; Effe and Lawlor, 2022; Ferreira-Meyers, 2015; James, 2022, among others). This undecidability is the result of autofiction's resistance to conventions and its permanent mutation (Effe and Lawlor 5), wherefore its application to several narrative modalities, including documentary, seems perfectly adequate. Similarly to autobiography, to whose general field it nevertheless belongs, autofiction is also subject to the nominal pact between author, narrator and character. However, *the norm* of the genre also requires something which is the very opposite of this condition. On the one hand, the author must adopt her/his own name and develop multiple functions so that the congruence with the referent is maintained; on the other hand, there is an evident fictionalisation of the lived, triggered by memory with its false premises as well as the deliberate use of imagination. This corresponds to Manuel Alberca's "ambiguous pact" (2007), according to which autobiographical narrative (i.e., facts) and fiction are so intertwined to the point of generating doubt in the recipients. Autofiction – especially of the autofiction subcategory – is set up between truth and invention, *constructing* a personal fiction of the self (Alberca 195). As observed by Doubrovsky, "if I try to remember, I invent" (qtd. Vilain, digital edition paragraph 6, my translation).¹⁸ No wonder that Doubrovsky's literary works are heavily marked by

(2011) does not satisfy the most subjective modality of self-representation. Its reflexivity focuses on the cinematic process. Although in this case the disclosure of the apparatus is not a requisite, the films are about their nature as artworks which reflect the entirety of cinema. Hence, it is the medium which self-represents itself, rather than its creator, a fact derived from the essayistic condition of these films.

18 It should be noted, however, that Doubrovsky changed his own concept of autofiction during his writing career (Effe and Lawlor 2).

analogies, figures of speech and free associations (Pibarot, digital edition paragraph 27), as is Vasconcelos's film *The Metamorphosis of Birds*.

For Vincent Colonna, a literary theorist of the subfield of self-fiction, as the title of his doctoral thesis (1989) reveals, autofiction is the result of a storytelling impulse, typical of the oneiric and fanciful proclivities of the human being, and a wish, albeit discreet, of placing oneself in evidence (2004). In this perspective, the author keeps her/his name but invents all else, to the point of representing oneself satirically or grotesquely, if she or he so desires. In the case of *The Metamorphosis of Birds* the option was clearly towards the lyrical, as the article so far has explained.

Luz Elena Herrera Zamudio (2007) decided to apply the essence of Colonna's literary theorisation to cinema, creating a specific taxonomy. In her modality of "biographical autofiction", reality is the result of creation; facts transform into lyricism. In other words, it is the author's self-expression that is important and not the precise illustration of her/his life. Although there is a corporeal (and vocalic) coincidence between, for example, "Nanni Moretti" in *Dear Diary* (*Caro diario*, 1993) and the eponymous film director, Herrera Zamudio considers that screen presence to be a fictional double. Another of Herrera Zamudio's modalities, that of "specular autofiction", is perfect to illustrate the reversibility between real and imaginary that mirrors the act of creation. For example, in *Husbands and Wives* (1992) the director Woody Allen is called Gabe Roth (and not "Woody Allen"), but he displays all the mannerisms and ideas we associate with Allen's cinematic persona, whether playing the protagonist or not. In this case the name was invented, but many of the film's events have an autobiographical feel to them and Allen's worldview is spread across the characters.

The problem with Herrera Zamudio's theorisation resides in the selection of her case studies since she only focuses on fictional films in which the creators represent themselves. This is akin to classifying a written work as a novel on the book cover; although it may be a fake classification, the readers are immediately prepared for an invented story. That being the only case possible, it would be fair to presume that the two above-mentioned modalities of autofiction could not be used in documentary cinema. However, I argue that *The Metamorphosis of Birds* – as highly complex, hybrid and seemingly unclassifiable as it is – is not a fictional film, opening an altogether new research pathway into autofiction, one that contemplates documentary as well. In fact, Vasconcelos's film may be considered a mixture of biographical and specular autofiction according to Herrera Zamudio, with the proviso that it be performative (in the intermedial sense used here). The social actors' performativity grants them a status equal to that of fictional characters, which is close to Herrera Zamudio's conception.

Federico Fellini's film *Interview* (*Intervista*, 1987) is a good example of this mixture. The film is not a documentary but, due to the author's multiple self-representation and the film's generic hybridity, it cannot be considered a traditional fictional film either. "Fellini" is

represented in myriad ways, some of them played by himself (that is, by the director's physical body), either in diegetic "reality" or in "dream", and others by an actor who plays the role of a younger Fellini. To this is added the usual Fellini's alter ego, the veteran actor Marcello Mastroianni. The film blends the shooting of an autobiographical intradiegetic film whose title is never mentioned with the pre-preproduction of a cinematic version of Franz Kafka's novel *America* (1911–1914), and the video recordings undertaken by a small Japanese press crew intent on interviewing the "director". Not to mention the dream-like excerpts and the deviations from the main narrative path. This fusion results in a combination of (im)possibilities, all of them performative because they reveal themselves in actions in progress and require role-playing. Let us not forget that Fellini claimed he was a liar,¹⁹ just as Agnès Varda considered herself a "*documenteuse*", which is the equivalent of saying that she saw herself as an expert in "docu-lies".

Applying the autofictional blending of modalities to *The Metamorphosis of Birds*, one is confronted with a Catarina who is and is not her, the author, but who depends entirely upon the author's existence to be experienced in full – simultaneously as a hypothetical reality and a probable fiction. In short, as a performance extended to all the people that vocalise the text she wrote. There is reversibility between the referential and fictional dimensions (Vilain, paragraph 13), emphasised with the use of mirrors in several moments of the film. It is worth mentioning here something which is amply forgotten: all mirrors reflect an inverted image of the one that is projected into them, but all represent the referent. Consequently, all mirrors are deeply untrue and yet quite documental. Put another way, they are *autofictional*.

Vasconcelos's film contains several mirrors because the leitmotif of mirroring is fundamental in two ways. On the one hand, a mirror is an apparatus that duplicates images and may enhance intermediality; on the other hand, it may serve as a marker of authorial enunciation. Self-representation may occur in both situations, and it is precisely in the confluence of the two above-mentioned modalities of autofiction that the metaphorical stance is best served. The round mirror that reveals the 'other side' of the room in which a frame with the pictorial representation of a sailboat is seen hanging extends the space into a profilmic setting which is off screen (and so remains) [Figure 17]. Indeed, this image is not preceded or followed by shots that reveal the rest of the room to us. Equally, the shot itself points to the fact that the film frame is a limit, bounding an area which contains a painting seen on a mirror, in turn seen inside a screen, metonymically representing the film as a work of art. The transmediality involved in the media representation of painting in a film is here placed at the service of a higher, more lyrical meaning, which is nevertheless combined with the ideological discourse on art. The mirror with a sailboat ingeniously embedded in it

19 The expression used in several interviews throughout his life is the title of a documentary on Fellini (*Son un gran bugiardo*, 2002).

does not directly reflect any human being, which means that there is no self-representation to speak of, but nevertheless the sailboat symbolises the grandfather, Henrique, who was a naval officer. Furthermore, the reflexive frame, by folding the space upon itself, showing what is *behind*, alludes to the production space and to the behind-the-scenes crew, pointing to Vasconcelos's filmic enunciation as a film director.²⁰

In the first few instances in the film in which mirrors reflect people, there is an immediate association between father and daughter, both orphaned of their mothers, united in the same grief. The round mirror which Catarina holds inside the frame, and which reflects her father sitting in the off-screen space, thus making him visible for the spectators, reveals two bodies as if grafted into a single image [Figure 18]. The verse and the often-mentioned reserve come together in one representation. Moreover, near this shot, there is a visual rhyme between an image of Catarina's eyes apparently looking towards the camera from a small mirror held in her hands, like an open book, and a similar shot of Jacinto's eyes captured in the same way. This moment is a self-representation of Catarina, who also represents her father as a double of herself.



Fig. 17. Specular reduplications



Fig. 18. The perfect symbiosis

According to Wagner-Egelhaaf's conception, the mirroring contained in *The Metamorphosis of Birds* is downright performative but in a different way than that proposed by Bill Nichols, although both conceptions complement each other. In Wagner-Egelhaaf's, the autofiction practised by the authors in literature (but also in cinema, I add) has real consequences on their lives. By *writing* an autobiography, "the act of writing itself is part

²⁰ The latter use corresponds to the use of the mirror as a tool of "impersonal enunciation" as per Gérard Genette in *L'énonciation impersonnelle, ou le site du film* (1991). In this perspective, the film is enunciated in full by its director (regardless of the diegetic narrators it contains) and certain strategies may implicate him/her.



Fig. 19. Catarina reflecting herself



Fig. 20. Jacinto is reflected

of the life that is autobiographically represented” (Wagner-Egelhaaf 31). “Hence, the act of autobiographical writing is the crucial point where life and writing merge” (31). For an essentially poetic work, this is a fundamental aspect. Wagner-Egelhaaf further compares the relationship of life and writing to the circularity of the ouroboros, the mythical serpent that devours its own tail and is a symbol of perpetuity. Such a circular structure is known in narrative as a Möbius strip and it is also present in Escher’s engravings, in which the interior and the exterior of architectural structures are so amalgamated that it is impossible to distinguish one from the other. This “strange loop” is unending. “If a person contemplates their life, the contemplation, in the very moment it takes place turns into an element of the life that the person is reflecting on” (Wagner-Egelhaaf 32). Put another way, this permanent motion in autofiction makes *the text* more performative (32). By becoming part of Vasconcelos’s life, the autofiction *The Metamorphosis of Birds* creates another, parallel, version of it, metamorphosing the director into art itself. When myths surpass reality, they cast a shadow over it, and the same happens with lyrical undertakings such as this.

Thematically, there is also a reversibility between life and the artwork. In *The Metamorphosis of Birds*, two aspects must be considered: the written text, which is uttered by multiple voice-overs throughout,²¹ and the whole film as a poetic enunciation composed of sounds, images, and their interconnection. In both cases the authorship belongs to Vasconcelos, either as scriptwriter or director. This should not be confused with Stella Bruzzi’s performative documentary category, as argued in *New Documentary*, centred on a performance undertaken as much by the social actors as by the creators. What makes the

21 Only rarely do we hear direct speech in the film, and always in reenactments: two of the young boys playing Battleship (also known as Sinking the Fleet); the family praying, including an invented prayer for a deceased bird; singing the Happy Birthday song during Jacinto’s anniversary party; and childish babbling during bathtime.

films in this category performative is, according to Bruzzi, the gaze towards the camera, which amounts to a recognition and parading of the artificiality contained in the process and is their main artistic goal. Although *The Metamorphosis of Birds* contains some gazes towards the camera, they are an exception and not the rule, and are combined with other performative devices; they are not undertaken by social actors but by real ones playing a role (although some of them are non-professional).

To conclude: The poetic, or metamorphosis as creative transformation

The contradictory nature of autofiction – placed in between referentiality and style and forced to respect both aspects at once – calls for an experimental self-representation. The use of intermediality and especially the poetic stance of the film, which is so well integrated in all the art forms manifest in *The Metamorphosis of Birds*, forms an added layer of overall performativity, directly connected to the voice-over polyphony. This is a structuring device that I place aside for the time being because it is less related to self-representation. More relevant in this case is the existing relationship between reality and storytelling and the continued hybridity.

In *The Metamorphosis of Birds*, Catarina Vasconcelos combines biographical elements with unreal, fantastic ones. The appearance of Zulmira fused with a bird's head [Figure 21]; the six Vasconcelos siblings covered in white sheets like ghosts [Figure 22]; the report of the conversations between Catarina and her own mother fifteen years after the latter's demise; or the impressive blossoming of the vegetation which in a month invades the house in which Triz and Henrique had lived, are some of the phenomena that the spectators see and hear in the film and which are reinforced by the cinematic visuality. These supernatural elements are the product of human invention, being justified by the metaphorical nature of the film which transforms them into impressions, feelings, and fancies. This fantastic atmosphere is combined with some life facts of the social actors. Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf, for example, claims that “desires and dreams are an intrinsic element of a person's existence and perhaps disclose more, and different, things about a person than mere biological data in chronological order” (27). The fact that Vasconcelos selected these fantastic enactments rather than others is foremost a disclosure of her own inner self.

The whole film is, therefore, an act of revelation, as the opening of the theatre curtain lets on. The peacock's feathers, a visual leitmotif in the film, so well used for promotional purposes, not only represent the feathers of birds that will fly,²² but mostly they expose the beauty of art – particularly in this hybrid and poetic approach. People and events are revealed

22 Albeit this bird only flies for short distances.



Fig. 21. "Zulmira challenged the rules of stories"



Fig. 22. "We are ghosts"

but always filtered through subjectivity and memory. The revelation is made by those who have endured, the ones left behind as a poetic voice of testimony. It is in this testimony that the revelation becomes reflection, especially on the part of the main filmic enunciator, the scriptwriter-director Catarina Vasconcelos. In *The Metamorphosis of Birds*, she writes herself in an apparently autobiographical but mostly lyrical (i.e., autofictional) stance. As such, Vasconcelos not only produces a work on herself, but she also metamorphoses herself as work – becoming one with her art.

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