

Three Fables

*The sore that bliss leaves behind
is called a stigma and not a scar.
Only the poet's words
give us news of it.
Poetic speech
is a shelter, not asylum.
Hannah Arendt.⁽²⁾*

2. H. Arendt, *Poemas*, p. 80, poem n. 63, "Untitled". Barcelona: Herder Editorial, 2017. Translated from Spanish into English by the translator.

1. Chorus.⁽³⁾

We see all that we hear.

Rita Azevedo Gomes⁽⁴⁾

VOICE 2: [Spanish] It is said that when a wolf enters cautiously to catch a hen and loses his footing, causing noise, he bites his paw to punish his mistake.

VOICE 1: [Hums a song to the melody of a guitar] [Portuguese] I know they call me a heretic, a witch, and a bloody foreigner. They say I have love for cats and a pact with the devil. Cats have a philosopher's soul. Nothing more. The devil is not a philosopher, he envies God and the creation of the world.

VOICE 2: [Spanish]: One day they are going to swallow them up.

VOICE 1: [Portuguese] In other times I would certainly try to expel the poison from the body, or else, boil it in wine.

VOICE 3: [French] Such is their spirit: cruel as knives with a sudden and deep cut. I have not seen them red with anger or rosy with joy.

VOICE 4: [Portuguese] The candles have been changed three times.

VOICE 2: [Portuguese] Here the air is hard and cold. I'm used to it. In so many years I've gotten used to it. I hear the bears growl and the wolves howl... and they talk.

VOICE 5: [Portuguese] What do they say?

VOICE 2: [Portuguese] They say: "It's not what it seems".
It's not what it seems...

VOICE 6: [Portuguese] You will only be cured if you carry out an undertaking successfully.

VOICE 2: [Portuguese] Don't listen to everything they say, I try to forget it. The days are quiet... You can no longer hear the lumberjacks cutting down the trees.

3. The text is a selection and rearrangement of dialogue from the film *A Portuguesa*, by Rita Azevedo Gomes, released in 2018. For this purpose, a version transcribed manually by the author from the subtitles accompanying the film was used.

4. A. Arroba, "Sound with Open Eyes (or Keep Describing so that I can See Better). Interview to Rita Azevedo Gomes"; p. 30; in *Interviews/Films Under Discussion: Cinema Comparative Cinema*, Vol. I, No. 2, Winter 2013.

VOICE 7: [French] Time will pass, all this will fade away, history will flow, and we will not be here. [briefly hums a melody]

VOICE 6: [Portuguese] I couldn't tell you. You cannot order fate to speak when it wants to remain silent.

VOICE 3: [French] I think you deserve better.

VOICE 2: [Portuguese] Deserve, deserve... What is this about deserving or not deserving?

VOICE 3: [French] There are moments when a kind of icy varnish separates us from everyone and everything.

VOICE 1: [Portuguese] You're too young to be a doctor.

VOICE 3: [French] And what do you see in him? Stones on rocks, and the smallest pebble is like a human head.

VOICE 1: [Portuguese] I see the world without the eyes of the world. I don't know. But if God became a man, he could also become a wolf or a cat. When you wait too long, what only rarely happens can happen.

VOICE 3: [French] I was afraid of what I might find here.

VOICE 1: [Portuguese] Leave the light on at the entrance.

2. Model.

Vision is not the same as visual perception.

Mieke Bal⁽⁵⁾

She lives on the highest mountain in the kingdom and, like Zeus in the myth, she spends her early years accompanied by a little goat. Her mother works, so every morning she entrusts the toddler to a neighbour in the village, a woman who, to have fresh dairy products, raises the animal in the courtyard of her own house, where the child spends her days playing. Our little girl soon shows a supernatural talent for painting, and like the Florentine artist Giotto, she already divinely portrays the goat at a very tender age. For her, anything is a brush with which to draw in the notebooks she is given, but also to decorate walls, furniture, doors and curtains. Coloured pencils are as good as coffee grounds, soft crayons or a piece of charcoal stolen from the brazier. When she is old enough to train her talent, her mother arranges for her to receive instruction from a local painter. But her lack of discipline is evident, and the training does not go beyond three or four lessons, mainly because she cannot bear to spend her time copying charcoal drawings, the mentor artist's didactic programme. The girl grows up and finds different ways to redirect her creative energy, at least temporarily: she plays an instrument, writes stories, plays various sports and, above all, dances every weekend until dawn. After a tumultuous adolescence and several disagreements with authority, it was time to go to university. She hesitates between Philosophy and Fine Arts but, assuming that in one she will have to write more than the other, and with a handwriting as poor as her spelling, she decides on artistic training. Her bachelor's degree goes by without academic glory, mainly because she spends more time experiencing life than studying. Classes start at 8 a.m., but she rarely arrives before noon, and she usually spends more time in the cafeteria or in the college gardens than in the classroom. In any case, thanks to her innate talent for the arts, she graduates without too many honours but with minimal effort. With two exceptions: painting and

5. M. Bal, "El esencialismo visual y el objeto de los estudios visuales", *Estudios Visuales*, No. 2, p. 29. Murcia: Ed. CENDEAC, December 2004.

contemporary theory. In these subjects she gets an "A" but does not achieve honours due to bureaucratic issues. She has the same problem in the other subjects, she does not maintain good relations with the teachers. She shows a strong reluctance towards hierarchy and a predisposition to constantly refute the teachers' arguments, two circumstances that invariably make her the black sheep of all departments.

At the end of her education, she must continue to make a living outside the art world, whose doors, without godmothers or godfathers, are completely closed to her. But she persists and, while she works as a waitress, fruit seller, street vendor, babysitter, food delivery girl, hostess at events, ticket seller, shop assistant in a clothes shop, kitchen assistant, go-go girl and a thousand other things, she continues to paint whenever and wherever she can. She continues to enjoy life with intensity, but she is also disciplined enough to get up early or go to bed late, with one drink too many or several hours of sleep too few, in order to paint. She does so in the corridor of the flat she shares with several friends, in her tiny room, on the terrace of a bar, on a piece of cardboard, in a school notebook, on a canvas received as a present or on one found in the street following the eviction of a house. Painting, painting and painting. That is her leitmotiv. Two years later, thanks to luck and her genius, the work pays off and she presents her first exhibition in a small but vibrant gallery. The show is a success and the story that follows is well known. In an arithmetic progression, she is soon represented by one of the best international galleries, appears regularly in the press and exhibits in museums in different countries. "What now?" she thinks. She should be happy but, despite all these achievements, she does not feel fulfilled. There is something that pricks her, a thorn, a constant restlessness, an unpleasant taste. A question that she cannot get out of her mind and that, probably, no painter fails to ask herself: "Have I painted a masterpiece? Where is my Mona Lisa?"

She knows that this is an ambiguous question that only time can resolve but, even so, it makes her days bitter. Her philosophy has always been to paint each painting as if it were her last, but this time it may be literal. She will play it all or nothing. She does not plan to stop until she collapses like a horse running across the desert. In order not to end up as lost as Frenhofer, the painter in Balzac's

novel, she senses that the most important thing is to choose the right soul to portray. She thinks of friends and relatives, of well-known characters and the anonymous faces she comes across in the street. She finds nothing. She wanders night and day looking for a face that inspires her, but to no avail. It is not beauty or ugliness that she desires, it is something else: an aura, for is it not the aura of the subject that is imprinted on the character of the work? Could Leonardo have painted the Mona Lisa without a model with that special smile? Months go by and she loses all hope, all motivation, she even stops painting. A full-blown crisis. As a cherry on the cake, she begins to suffer from digestive problems, feeling pain after eating almost anything. Her doctors diagnose a psychosomatic disorder, but they also recommend, just in case, that she take care of her diet. Following their instructions, she begins to eat better bread. It is her favourite food and the basis of her diet, but for many years she has been swallowing anything that vaguely resembles bread and is sold under that name. Someone recommends an artisan bakery in her neighbourhood and, the next morning, she goes there to get her daily ration of baked wheat. Miracle! As soon as she enters, she is dazzled by the baker who is there alone to serve the customers. Her face lights up the small shop, turning the flour sprinkled on the bread into silver dew and stardust. It is the face she has been dreaming of for months for her great work. She is normally shy but, emboldened by the sight and taking advantage of the fact that she's the only customer in the shop, she blurts out the whole speech: that she is a renowned painter, that she wants to paint her masterpiece, that she can only do it with a face as special as hers, that she has been looking for her for months, that she should please agree to come to her studio to sit for her portrait, that she will pay her well and by the hour, that there is no indecent or twisted intention... until her throat dries up and her voice cracks from the monologue. The baker at first takes the matter as a joke but, sensing the importance of the matter for the painter, promises to think about it. "But for now, let me continue selling bread to the customers!" —she said.

The next morning, the painter shows up at the bakery again and asks her if she has made a decision, which she hopes would be positive. This time she appears laden with several catalogues of her exhibitions, so that she can show her work and examples of previous portraits, arguments with which she finally convinces the model. They come to

an agreement and establish a work schedule. Three hours at the end of her working days and seven hours on Sundays. It is not as much as the painter would like, but it may be enough. Many weeks of intense work go by in which the complicity between the painter and the model ends up being absolute. The baker slept many nights at the painter's house, the hours of posing were extended, and the portrait was finished in time for the next exhibition: a retrospective at the most important art gallery in the kingdom. Two hundred years later, the portrait of the baker, known as *La fornarina*, hangs in exactly the same place where it was displayed during that exhibition. A privileged spot in the best room of the museum, where the public crowds every day to admire it. The model's face appears on T-shirts, tote bags, thimbles, fridge magnets and jigsaw puzzles. She has been reproduced endlessly, reinterpreted again and again. She has even been the subject of novels and films. It is one of those works that people have made their own without needing to know much about it. The light emanating from her face is a promise of happiness. The painter's name is printed on a small plaque at the bottom of the painting. Her face only appears, photographed, in specialised books.

3. Academy.

(...) sometimes I could remember a picture that nobody had painted.
Cristina Peri Rossi ⁽⁶⁾

- What is painting?
- It depends
- On what?
- On many things.
- Like what?
- On where you are.
- For example?
- It's not the same in London as in Paris or Barcelona.
- Why is that?
- In London, painting is a representation on a surface executed in paint or colours, a painted picture or likeness.⁽⁷⁾ In Paris, painting is the arrangement on a surface of colours and graphic elements, lines, surfaces and shapes, to represent, suggest a theme or respond to a simply aesthetic design.⁽⁸⁾ And in Barcelona, painting is the art of painting and a pictorial representation. It is also a table, sheet or canvas on which something is painted.⁽⁹⁾
- The three are similar.
- Yes, but they are not the same.
- How can that be?
- I once read that language builds the world.
- How does it do that?
- The way we name things ends up conditioning the way we see them.

6. C. Peri Rossi, *La nave de los locos*: pág. 34. Barcelona: Editorial Seix Barral, 1984.

7. Definition of *Painting* in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Accessed on 11/07/2023: <https://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/136092#:text=Thesaurus%20%C2%BB-a,Also%20figurative>.

8. Definition of *Peinture* in the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, 9th edition (current). Consulted on 11/07/2023: <https://www.dictionnaire-academie.fr/article/A9P1228>.

9. Definition of *Pintura* in the *Diccionari de la llengua catalana de l'Institut d'Estudis Catalans*. Accessed on 11/07/2023: <https://dlc.iec.cat/Results?IdE=0011166&DecEntradaText=pintura&AllInfoMorf=False&OperEntrada=0&OperDef=0&OperEx=0&OperSubEntrada=0&OperAreaTematica=0&InfoMorfType=0&OperCatGram=False&AccentSen=False&CurrentPage=0&refineSearch=0&Actualitzacions=False>.

—As far as I know, a rose is a rose is a rose.
—And painting is painting is painting.

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