

COSTA, João Pedro Bénard da (Lisbon, 1935 – Lisbon, 2009)

João Bénard da Costa, as he is commonly known, is regarded and remembered today as one of the most notable personalities of Portuguese culture who made the greatest contributions to the history of cinema. Stating that he was a professor, writer and above all, a cinephile, falls short in light of his uncommon culture, coupled with immense creativity unleashed by a sensitive and passionate way of expressing that which is almost impossible to put into words: the universe of human feelings revealed in (and through) art. He was born in Lisbon on 7 February 1935 to an upper middle class family, the son of João Pedro da Costa and Maria Margarida Bénard. He began by studying law, but ended up graduating with honours in 1959 with a degree in History and Philosophy from the Faculty of Arts of the University of Lisbon. His thesis was entitled *Do tema do "Outro" no Personalismo de Emmanuel Mounier* (The Theme of the "Other" in Emmanuel Mounier's Personalism). Although he was invited by Professor Delfim Santos to be his assistant at the Faculty of Arts, his university career was stopped short due to the intervention of the PIDE (Portuguese secret police). His interest in Portuguese and foreign film from a young age, as seen through many of his works on cinema, but with a distinct autobiographical slant – such as there *Muito lá de Casa* (1993) – show his fascination with foreign cultures and mentalities, much more ethically, politically and culturally open than those of the Portuguese...

Between 1959 and 1965 he was a secondary school teacher, teaching History and Philosophy at the Seminário Menor in Almada, at the Frei Luís de Sousa day school in the same city, and at the Liceu Camões and Colégio Moderno in Lisbon. History left a constant mark on his thinking and his writing. This is particularly visible in his speeches as President of the Committee for the Commemoration of the Day of Portugal, Camões and the Portuguese Communities. He was appointed to this position by the president of Portugal and held it for eleven years, from 1997 to 2008. In these speeches he celebrated each Portuguese city with a precise historical evocation, invoking notable local personalities. In one of his first speeches, given in Lisbon in 1998, he began by noting that, upon taking office as President of the Council of Ministers in September 1968, Marcelo Caetano said, in one of the most anticipated political speeches of this century, that he did not want to see 'the Portuguese people divided among themselves as enemies'. He developed this thought by stating that over the last two centuries of the history of Portugal, the Portuguese people had always acted divided and like enemies: during the Napoleonic wars; divided as enemies between absolutists and liberals, culminating in a civil war that, with its consequences and extensions, ravaged the country from 1815 to 1851; and the list goes on... (1998-2008. *Os dias de Portugal*, 'The Days of Portugal', 2010, pp. 14-15) In other words, in a brief yet concise and crucial manner he traversed the history of Portugal, seeking to justify the idea that the past is essential to understanding our present. In the same speech he stated, establishing the causal link between national history and individual history: "If he who fears the future is its most likely victim, he who fears the past also shall not win. We will be what we shall be, when we are able to assume what we were. Woe to he who repents what he was, because he that is what he still is. If this maxim applies to our individual history – not to call it small, because it is the only one that is great – it also applies to our collective history. As history teaches us, each time someone has wanted to start from scratch – a new man, a new society – he always ended up worse off than those who sought to overthrow themselves". (*Ibid*, p. 17). In 2004, in the city of Bragança, he once again invoked the past in order to apply it to the present time when he quoted Francisco Manuel Alves, in a passage dating from 1912, to emphasise that the Abbot's

lament still held true in current-day Portugal: "By God! Let us cease to give, before the foreigner, the sad spectacle of a people who are unable to build their future and who do not appreciate the traditions of its past" (*Ibid*, p. 55). This historical perspective was also combined with his immense film culture. An example was in Viseu, in his speech on 10 June 2000. That same year, according to João Bénard da Costa, commemorated the centenary of the birth of director Luis Buñuel, who was thought to have filmed *Tristana* (1970) in Viseu, after a visit to the Portuguese city. This decision, as he explained, came about after incidents with censorship surrounding the debut of *Viridiana* (1961), and which made the Spanish director fear he would not be allowed to film in Spain. In his opinion, Viseu could take the place of Toledo, where the novella by Perez Galdos of the same name, and on which the film was based, was set (*Ibid*, p. 26).

His biography would be incomplete without mentioning the political persecution he suffered. In 1957/1958 he was President-General of the Juventude Universitária Católica (Catholic University Youth) and film society leader at the Centro Cultural de Cinema (Cinema Cultural Centre, or CCC) between 1957 and 1960. Between 1960 and 1963 he received a scholarship from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. The film societies were very important to his training as a cinephile. João Bénard da Costa stated that it was in these societies that he started to learn about the cinema: "I learned a lot and a generation - mine - owes its love of cinema to these historic film society screenings, which beginning in the late 1950s were relentlessly persecuted by a regime that was increasingly leery of them." (*Os filmes da minha vida/Os meus filmes da vida*, 'The Films of My Life/Films of a Lifetime', 1990, p. 7). His first work as a programmer was at the Lisbon Cine-Club Universitário, in 1956-57, when he published, always as a defender of Catholic ideas, his first text on a film, specifically on *Miracolo a Milano*, by Vittorio De Sica. About this text, João Bénard da Costa states that his writing was "as Christian as it was Marxist, in a time of coded language." (*Ibid.*) The film societies were publicly accused by the Salazar regime of being connected to the Communist Party, and therefore were persecuted by the political police. His programming exhibited films from Italian neo-realism, French poetic realism, some American films, Mexican realism and British films – as long as they were able to get past the censors. However, according to his testimony, within the film societies "not everything was orthodoxy. On the contrary, there was even a lot of heterodoxy manufactured there" (*ibid.*) – also due to the alliance between the Catholic left and the communists, of which João Bénard da Costa was a member. Saying that someone was a "leftist" could be cause for arrest in Portugal at that time, so they said that they were "progressive Catholics". João Bénard da Costa identified with this name, changing the Cine-Clube Universitário de Lisboa to the Centro Cultural de Cinema (Cinema Cultural Centre, or CCC), also known as the Cineclube de Universitários para uma Cultura Cristã (University Film Club for a Christian Culture). As explained by Antonio Rodrigues, in addition to affinities with Christian culture and class, two other factors were important for his connection to the CCC: one was linked to the fact that the films chosen were different than those shown in other film societies, because they dealt with the spirit of Catholicism (Bresson and Rossellini were his directors of choice). The other factor was related to the texts for submission of the films, which were written by the directors of the film society themselves. The latter explains the precious "Folhas da Cinematheca" (Pages of the Cinematheque) – no other European Cinematheque has them except the Portuguese Cinematheque. In fact, "he would remain faithful to this practice during the nearly forty years of his career as programmer." (*Magníficas obsessões*, 'Magnificent Obsessions', 2011, pp. 32-33).

João Bénard da Costa was also one of the founders of the magazine *O Tempo e o Modo* (Time and Manner), in 1963. He was its editor-in-chief, and from 1963 to 1970, its director. He was a researcher at the

Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation Centre for Educational Research from 1964 to 1966 and Executive Secretary of the Portuguese Committee of the International Association for Cultural Freedom from 1966 to 1974.

When the Cinema Sector of the Department of Fine Arts of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation was created in 1969, he was put in charge of this office until 1991. He returned to teaching from 1973 to 1980, as Professor of Film History at the National Conservatory's Escola Superior de Cinema. He taught the same course in 1994-95 at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities of the Universidade Nova de Lisboa and, in 1999-2000, at the Universidade Lusófona.

Until the age of thirty-nine, João Bénard da Costa was born, lived and earned his degree in Portugal during the Estado Novo, with first Salazar and then Marcelo Caetano as the only figures of the Portuguese government. By the very nature of the authoritarian regime, which involved censorship of all forms of artistic expression, many important films in the history of the cinema could not be shown in Portugal. Even when it was not banned, a film's subtitles and/or images could be cut or undergo changes to its dialogues. Restrictions were political, religious and moral in nature, and perhaps also because of this, this lack of pivotal films in Portugal lasted longer than in any other country in Europe where there was a dictatorship. For example, if the film by Julien Duvivier, *Pépé-le-Moko* (1936), was not commercially distributed in Portugal, that fact can likely be explained by its final denouement, in which the villain is prevented from being arrested – and thus serving the deserved punishment – because he commits suicide. For these reasons, João Bénard da Costa was only able to see the classic *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), directed by Eisenstein, when he was twenty-three years old, on his first trip to Paris. This film was banned in Portugal for over forty-nine years (*Ibid*, p. 20-21).

In 1980, João Bénard da Costa was appointed deputy director of the Portuguese Cinematheque, its director in 1991, and in 1997 he became its president. In 2007, he was re-appointed its director due to the change in the law of the Portuguese Cinematheque – Cinema Museum. His role as a programmer was remarkable in the Portuguese film scene and can be explained by his having been trained by the enthusiasm for and love of cinema. If programmers like him still exist, they are very rare. Unlike most film programmers, João Bénard da Costa did not base his work in relation to the academic or university world, which would mean prohibiting the personal involvement of the viewer and the inherent feeling of pleasure. Like many of his generation, but also those who came before or after, João Bénard da Costa discovered film through a personal journey. Perhaps his emotional connection to film may explain, according to António Rodrigues, "his blind spots, like Fellini and documentary filmmaking in general, which he did not like. Particularly for having been trained by the *Cahiers du Cinéma* of the 1950s (he was sixteen years old when the magazine was founded on the ashes of the *Revue du Cinéma*) (...)" (*ibid.*, p. 19). As this author then states, for someone like João Bénard da Costa, trained in the 1950s, anyone who made a good film in his or her life is a great director forever and therefore a great filmmaker is not allowed to make bad films. His subjectivity, inherent in the way it literally enters every film he sees, is explicitly revealed through a written hallmark in the *Folhas da Cinemateca*, which he himself wrote: João Bénard da Costa underlined words or bits of sentences as a way of highlighting their importance in the context of what he wanted to say. This underlining is another way of emphasising a particular aspect that he considered emotionally pertinent and absolute for the understanding of a particular film, similar to how in his work *Muito lá de casa* (1994) he confesses that he fell

madly in love with Esther Williams... But also with Joan Fontaine, and also with Alida Valli... All of them "the most beautiful women in the world", although later, as he confesses, his opinion and taste changed a few times.

As for publications, in addition to his collaborations scattered in various international magazines and newspapers, he published several works in the fields of pedagogy, philosophy, and mainly, the history of cinema. Among the latter are research papers published by the Portuguese Cinematheque – Cinema Museum on filmmakers and film genres: *Luis Buñuel* (1982), *Alfred Hitchcock* (1982), *John Ford* (1983), *Fritz Lang* (1983), *Nicholas Ray* (1984), *Josef von Sternberg* (1984), *O Musical* ('The Musical', 1987, dedicated to this film genre), *Howard Hawks* (1988). His works also include *Os filmes da minha vida/Os meus filmes da vida* ('Films of My Life/My Films of a Lifetime', 1990) and *Os filmes da minha vida 2 vol.* ('Films of My Life', Vol. 2 2007). The first volume brought together the first series of his chronicles published in the newspaper *O Independente* from 1988 to 1989. The second brought together fifty-two chronicles that he published in the same newspaper, between 26 January 1996 and 23 May 1997 under the title "Os melhores filmes da nossa vida" (The Best Films of our Lives). In both works, João Bénard da Costa selected some of the films he considered special and discussed them in depth. His reflections, always well-grounded, are still markedly personal because, as he warns in the introduction to the second volume: "I will not be – will never be – objective. I will not serve 'ready-to-wear' films, such as those that invariably top the invariant lists of the 'best films of all time'. The best, only the best for me. I only know about my life and not yours. Even more serious, I believe mine is ours and ours is mine." (*Os filmes da minha vida*, Vol. 2, 2007, p. 12). In 1991 he published *Histórias do cinema português* ('Stories of Portuguese Cinema'), which is perhaps where he most harmoniously combined his inherent and unique subjectivity to an absolute desire to convey historical objectivity – which, as mentioned, has always been present in his work, even if indirectly or subtly. In addition to paragraphs in which he describes the historical, social and political context of Portugal, an example of this are his footnotes that appear throughout this work, presenting short biographies of important figures in the history of Portugal, alongside the path of the history of Portuguese cinema: such as the kings of Portugal, Mário Soares or Otelo Saraiva de Carvalho. His attention to historical events is explicitly revealed at each step: "Interestingly, the evolution of Portuguese cinema over these 14 years has drawn a similar curve to Portugal's political curve." (*Histórias do cinema português*, 1991, p. 165) He also published *O Cinema português nunca existiu* (Portuguese Cinema Never Existed, 1996), to celebrate the centenary of Portuguese cinema, and in which he comments, seemingly paradoxically, on the fact that in Portugal there is no tradition of cinema that allows for the indisputable emergence of the concept of "classic Portuguese cinema." The book *Histórias do cinema português* has also been published in English, French (1991) and German (1997). Between these two works, he published *Muito lá de casa* (1994). This work compiled the chronicles he published in newspapers and reveals, above all, his emotional relationship with cinema when selecting and commenting on the many actors and actresses who left a mark on his life. As stated in the note he included in the second edition of the work, João Bénard da Costa admits that changes and corrections to the first edition are minimal: "And I tell you frankly that I have not felt like adding anyone else. This is not a book about 'lá de casa' (from back home), but a book about 'muito lá de casa' (from way back home). The adverb is of time. This does not apply to recent visits, to a home where you have only seen the rooms and the bathroom." (*Muito lá de casa*, 2007, p. 10, author's italics). Portrayed among these actors and actresses, mostly belonging to classic American cinema, are, among others, Gary Cooper, Joseph Cotten, Joan

Fontaine, Gene Thierny, James Mason, and Ingrid Bergman. His relationship with these figures he saw in the cinema is particularly subjective, because it describes the relationship he established with them simply as a spectator, before becoming a cinephile. The emotional closeness that binds João Bénard da Costa to these characters allows him to draw a self-portrait, as if they were members of his family, lovers or childhood friends. For example, with regard to Joan Fontaine he writes: "Do not ask me for more physical details as I have already said that I forgot them. But I have never seen a woman so beautiful (at least so I thought) and that was the justification I gave for the erosion. Again and again, when her image eluded me, I ran to the entrance of the Eden to see posters and photos and to try to grab onto her." (*Ibid*, p. 31).

From 1990 to 1995 João Bénard da Costa was President of the Programming Committee of the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF). He was in charge of the "Portuguese Cinema" chapter of the *Einaudi* encyclopaedia included in *History of World Cinema*, coordinated by Gian-Piero Brunetta, 2000. His essays on Portuguese cinema can also be found in collective works on twentieth century art, published by AR.CO (1999) and the National Cultural Centre (1998). In addition to these publications, he was invited in 2004 by the Instituto Complutense de Ciencias Musicales in Madrid to coordinate the volume dedicated to Portugal of the *History of Spanish, Portuguese and Latin American Cinema*, to be published in 2010.

In addition to these publications, he was a columnist at the newspapers *Expresso* and *Público*. Other studies, in addition to cinema and its history, reveal his extensive and varied cultural interests. This is the case of the following works: *Emmanuel Mounier* (Moraes, 1960), *Os silêncios do Vaticano* ('The Silence of the Vatican', Moraes, 1966), *Da pedagogia não directiva como pedagogia personalista* ('Non-directive pedagogy as personalist pedagogy', Gulbenkian, 1966), *Nós os vencidos do Catolicismo* ('We, the vanquished of Catholicism', Tenacitas, 2003). In this work from 2003, João Bénard da Costa brought together a series of chronicles that were published in August of 1997 in the weekly *Independente*. These chronicles are based on the poem by Ruy Belo "*Nós os vencidos do catolicismo*", and constitute a personal testimony of a militant Catholic and which culminates in a state of rupture with the organic and hierarchical structure of the Church. This expression, which is the title of that poem, would earn a generational meaning thanks to João Bénard da Costa, its primary promoter. As noted above, his religious position is also related to his opposition to the authoritarian regime of the time: "We multiplied [in the early 1960s] in speeches and debates. The encyclicals of John XXIII, the Council, justified them and demanded them and there were no 'clarification sessions' in any church or parish hall, where we did not appear as shock troops to throw into relief the growing contradiction between the thoughts of the Pope and the work of the regime." (*Nós os vencidos do Catolicismo*, 2003, p. 68)

He was also an actor in more than a dozen feature films by Manoel de Oliveira, under the pseudonym Duarte d'Almeida. He played a role in the film *Recordações da Casa Amarela* – 1989, directed by João César Monteiro. João Bénard da Costa had a very close relationship with Manoel de Oliveira. When the director turned one hundred years old, the Cinematheque also turned fifty years old, and João Bénard da Costa dedicated the closing festivities of the Cinematheque's anniversary to him, with a nearly complete retrospective of his work to date, from 17 October 2008 to 17 December 2008 – leaving out only *Visitas ou memórias de confissões*, from 1982, which Manoel de Oliveira himself decided could only be shown after his death.

In addition to the aforementioned post of Chairman of the Committee for the Commemoration of the Day of Portugal, Camões and the Portuguese Communities, which he held for eleven years from 1997 to

2008, João Bénard da Costa was an honorary member of the National Centre for Culture and member of the Portuguese Academy of History.

As for prizes and honours, he was awarded the Order of Infante D. Henrique by President Mário Soares in 1990, and in 2005, with the Grand Cross of the Military Order of Christ, by President Jorge Sampaio. In November 2005 he was awarded with the rank of *Commandeur des Arts et des Lettres from France* (he had been an *Officier* since 1983) and in the same month, he was awarded the Medal of Honour from the Escola Superior de Teatro e Cinema, as an honour from the school. In April 2006, he was awarded the Order of the Star of Italian Solidarity. In 1995, he was awarded the first Prize of Film Studies from the Universidade de Coimbra. The Pessoa Prize was given to him in 2001. Finally, in 2008 he was awarded the *João Carreira Bom* prize for chronicles, and in September of that same year he was awarded the Medal of Cultural Merit by the Minister of Culture.

Until the end of his life, João Bénard da Costa loved and surrendered himself completely to the cinema. His passion permeated dates and events with a very characteristic symbolism: he left the Cinematheque on the last working day of 2008. On 22 May 2009 – the day after his death – while his body lay in the church that he had chosen for his funeral, according to António Rodrigues, "the Cinematheque, with its doors open to all, ran his 'film of a lifetime', which by secret paths was perhaps, in a way, the film of his life: *Johnny Guitar*. It was the last film screening scheduled by João Bénard da Costa (...)" (*Magníficas obsessões* 'Magnificent Obsessions', 2011, p. 159). All that he did for Portuguese culture in general and especially for its cinema will never be forgotten. He will remain "*muito lá de casa*", or rather, João Bénard da Costa will be forever in our home.

Works by João Pedro Bénard da Costa: *Emmanuel Mounier*. Lisboa, Moraes Editores, 1960; *Os silêncios do Vaticano*. Lisboa, Moraes Editores, 1966; *Da pedagogia não directiva como pedagogia personalista*. Lisboa, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 1966; *Os filmes da minha vida. Os meus filmes da vida*. Lisboa, Assírio & Alvim, 1990; *Histórias do cinema português*. Lisboa, Imprensa Nacional – Casa da Moeda, *Muito lá de casa*. Lisboa, Assírio & Alvim, 1994 / 2007; *O cinema português nunca existiu*. Lisboa, CTT – Correios de Portugal, 1996;

Nós os vencidos do Catolicismo. Coimbra, Tenacitas, 2003; *Os filmes da minha vida*. 2º Vol. Lisboa, Assírio & Alvim, 2007; *Como o cinema era belo*. Lisboa, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 2007; *1998-2008. Os dias de Portugal. Discursos de João Bénard da Costa*. Coordenação de Lúcia Guedes Vaz e Pedro Rapoula. Lisboa, Edição da Presidência da República, 2010.

Works with reference to João Pedro Bénard da Costa: REVEZ, Jorge, *Os "vencidos do catolicismo". Militância e atitudes críticas (1958-1974)*. Prefácio de Sérgio Campos Matos. Lisboa, Centro de Estudos de História religiosa – Universidade Católica Portuguesa, 2009; "João Bénard da Costa". [Consult. 12 de Outubro de 2011]. Disponível em: [http // pt.wikipedia.org](http://pt.wikipedia.org).; RODRIGUES, António, *Magníficas obsessões: João Bénard da Costa, um programador de cinema*. Lisboa, Cinemateca Portuguesa – Museu do Cinema, 2011.

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