

## Elderly intimacy in Petra Costa's Documentary *Olhos de Ressaca*

Sophia Beal\*

Ficaram traços da família  
perdidos no jeito dos corpos.  
Bastante para sugerir  
que um corpo é cheio de surpresas.

Carlos Drummond de Andrade (1943/1967)

*Family features remain  
lost in the play of bodies.  
But there's enough to suggest  
that a body is full of surprises.*

Carlos Drummond de Andrade (1943/1972)<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Translated by Elizabeth Bishop.

In Petra Costa's 2009 documentary *Olhos de ressaca* (*Undertow Eyes*), two people in love kiss, dance, and lie in bed together. Individually, we watch the two characters swim, undress, and shower.<sup>1</sup> The film provides frequent close-ups of this duo's lips, eyes, and caresses. Such thematic and aesthetic explorations of sensuality are common in films, but what is remarkable in *Olhos de ressaca* is the age of the protagonists. The two characters we see embracing one another are in their eighties. The skin we observe at such close proximity is wrinkled and blemished. Costa's film examines how sensuality evolves between two people who have been married for decades. *Olhos de ressaca* brings to the fore a frequently forgotten, often taboo topic: the intimacy of the elderly.

Despite the fact that people are living increasingly longer and with greater vitality in their later years, the physical intimacy of the elderly is rarely discussed. Scholar Bernard D. Starr wrote, "[...] if ageism typifies the history of attitudes toward the elderly, then nowhere is this prejudice more apparent than in the area

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<sup>1</sup>The film *Olhos de ressaca* can be viewed in its entirety at Vimeo (available at: <http://vimeo.com/15069615>). More information regarding the film is available at [www.elenafilme.com](http://www.elenafilme.com).

of sexuality” (STARR, 1985, p. 97). Studies conducted into representations of the elderly in television and cinema note that in the rare representations of elderly sensuality, the focus tends to be on single men and is most often presented humorously. Writing in 1992, cultural studies critic John Bell noted the lack of representations of elderly sexuality in television, a point that also rings true in film: “[...]sexuality, thus, is an important absence in the lives of most elderly television characters, and especially in the lives of elderly women” (BELL, 1992, p. 309). One study of the visual limitations of elderly sexuality in film examined thousands of mainstream movies shown in Swedish cinemas in the year 2000 to find that only nine depicted elderly people in leading roles (BILDTÅRD, 2000, p. 172). With such low numbers, there were scarce opportunities to analyze the depictions of elderly intimacy on screen. This tendency is in no way new, since, as sociologist Herbert Covey argues, a disproportional lack of portrayals of elderly people’s sensuality in literature dates back to at least the Middle Ages (COVEY, 1989, p. 95).

Portrayals of young, healthy people being physically intimate have long dominated the arts, but a desire to finally see elderly sensuality thoughtfully and creatively addressed on screen may explain the critical success of *Olhos de ressaca*. The film won Best Short Film at the Rio de Janeiro International Film Festival 2009, the Special Jury Prize at the Gramado Film Festival 2009, Top 10 of the Audience at the São Paulo International Short Film Festival 2009, Best Film at the Goiânia Mostra Curtas 2009, and Best Short Documentary at the 13th Cine Las Americas International Film Festival. These and other awards put Costa’s debut film on the radar of Brazilian critics and cinema enthusiasts before the release of her acclaimed feature-length documentaries *Elena* (2012) and *Olmo and the Seagull* (2014, co-directed by Lea Glob). The treatment of elderly sensuality in *Olhos de ressaca* slips neither into crudeness nor sensationalism. It engages the full range of this period of life more openly than has been customary in film. Costa’s attentive and imaginative engagement with the topic is displayed in the film’s portrayal of skin, memory, and the way a couple’s intimacy changes over time.

## Skin

At the start of the twenty-minute documentary, the audience meets the two protagonists, Vera and Gabriel. The scene is shot with a Super 8 camera — with its characteristic graininess — that zooms in on the couple’s skin. With no dialogue or voiceover, our introduction to the couple is visceral, influenced by the sound of the ocean, the sound of slow heavy breathing, eerie instrumentals, and the luscious light illuminating their skin in the close-up shots of fingers against a chest. In an interview, the director noted that it took great effort to convince Vera and Gabriel — her maternal grandparents — to touch each other so intimately in front of the camera. However, as spectators, we witness a natural intimacy. This is a corporeal

introduction to the couple, one in which skin and breath take precedence over narrative.

This introduction allows the spectator to behold the elderly couple intimately. Thus, we are prepared to see in their subsequent kisses neither humor nor schmaltz, but profound emotion. Typically in documentaries, the elderly serve as sources of knowledge that is under threat of being lost with their passing. In contrast, Costa introduces not elderly people's ideas, but their physicality, as the film's title suggests. The film's title, in its nod to *Dom Casmurro* (1899), recalls how Machado's narrator-protagonist frequently refers to Capitu's "undertow eyes", suggesting the mysterious power her eyes have over him. In *Olhos de ressaca*, Gabriel recites the following passage (omitting just a few words) from the thirty-second chapter of *Dom Casmurro*:

They carried I know not what mysterious and energetic fluid, a force that dragged one in, like a wave that moves away from the beach, on the days with undertow. So as not to be dragged in, I clung to my neighbor's parts, to her ears, her arms, her hair spread over her shoulders; but as soon as I looked for her pupils, the wave that surged from them grew, cavernous and dark, threatening to envelop me, pull me in, and devour me.<sup>2</sup>

In Costa's film, Gabriel speaks of Vera's "undertow eyes", to highlight the emotional power her gaze has over him, which is reinforced by the film's close-ups of Vera's eyes. Thus, the film's narrative and its imagery underscore the themes of physical attraction and intimacy.

At the start of Costa's film, two shadows — Vera and Gabriel's — merge with the shadows of vegetation. This intermingling of shadows moves the spectator further away from a logical, descriptive understanding of the characters. Instead, we acknowledge the characters' bodies as volumes juxtaposed to their skin as surface, elements that accentuate the couple's physicality. *Olhos de ressaca* offers a poignant and unorthodox view of the mystery of the ageing process at a moment when the anti-ageing business is thriving. The typical (and lucrative) self-help trope from the beauty industry is that beauty products, plastic surgery, and other fixes provide youthful beauty and happiness, suggesting that satisfaction is to be found in wrinkle-free skin. In contrast, *Olhos de ressaca* interprets skin differently; skin, in the film, is not as an organ in a slow state of deterioration that can be made to look younger, but as an object that, over time, gains texture and experience.

Throughout the film, we see many shots of Gabriel shirtless, as well as a scene of Vera swimming in a pool. Along with the many close-ups, these images give the

<sup>2</sup>In Portuguese: "Traziam não sei que fluido misterioso e enérgico, uma força que arrastava para dentro, como a vaga que se retira da praia, nos dias de ressaca. Para não ser arrastado, agarrei-me às outras partes vizinhas, às orelhas, aos braços, aos cabelos espalhados pelos ombros; mas tão depressa buscava as pupilas, a onda que saía delas vinha crescendo, cava e escura, ameaçando envolver-me, puxar-me e tragar-me."

audience a proximity to the skin that is rare in cinematic representations of the elderly. Costa — with a reference to the documentary’s director of photography, Eryk Rocha — describes the centrality of skin in the film:

As soon as we started filming, Eryk and I talked many times about how we wanted to make an *epidermal* film — a film that revealed the texture of their skin and the rich history contained in those textures. As I filmed my grandparents’ skin, I remember thinking repeatedly that it seemed to gain a story and beauty like the trunks of old trees revealing the past through their texture (COSTA, 2011b).<sup>3</sup>

Costa’s close-ups of skin are in dialogue with the work of a French filmmaker who has inspired her greatly: Agnès Varda (COSTA, 2011a). Varda filmed her husband and fellow filmmaker Jacques Demy’s skin after he had been diagnosed with HIV and shortly before his death. Varda did so when she was making the documentary *Jacquot de Nantes* (JACQUOT, 1991) about Demy’s childhood, and some of the footage appears in her documentary *Les plages d’Agnès* (*The Beaches of Agnès*, 2008), as well as the Brazilian documentary *Janela da alma* (*Window to the Soul*, 2001), directed by João Jardim and Walter Carvalho. *Janela da alma* includes an interview with Varda in which she explains how, in retrospect, she realized that she filmed Demy from so close due to her fear of losing him. In an extreme close-up in which Varda’s camera slowly moves along Demy’s arm, skin ceases to register as skin, instead looking like an imaginary landscape, a world all its own.

Varda and Costa’s close-up camera work expresses the proximity and intimacy between the director and the person or people being filmed. In *Olhos de ressaca*, this camerawork makes aging skin appear wondrous; elderly caresses seem generous and skilled. Costa’s methods of visually privileging the texture of elderly skin and the intimacy of an elderly couple’s skin-to-skin contact honors — as opposed to rejects or ignores — the physicality of the elderly.

## Memory

Three minutes into the film, a scene uses layering of different images and audio to suggest how the intimacy of the elderly couple is inescapably informed by the past. This message is enhanced by the antiquated, memory-evoking appearance of images. With the exception of the 16 mm archive footage Vera shot with

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<sup>3</sup>In Portuguese: “Logo que começamos a filmar, Eryk e eu, falamos muitas vezes que queríamos fazer um filme epidérmico — um filme que revelasse a textura daquelas peles e a rica história contida nessas texturas. Enquanto eu filmava a pele dos meus avós, lembro de pensar muitas vezes como a pele deles parecia ganhar história e beleza como os troncos das árvores antigas, que revelam o passado através da sua textura.”

a Bolex camera decades prior, all of *Olhos de ressaca* was shot with a Super 8 camera and a handheld high-definition video (HDV) camera. In this scene, Costa manipulates the exposure of the HDV camera in order to create a more abstract quality (COSTA, 2011b). We hear Vera's voice in a voiceover while the shots change several times, including footage of Vera and Gabriel dancing with a group on a bright street. The scene begins full of playful music, exuberant color, youthful background characters, and bright light, all of which serve to establish a joyful tone. As spectators, we may imagine that these young people are family members invited to take part in a scene that celebrates the elderly couple. However, Costa explained in an interview that the appearance of this group was serendipitous:

During the shoot, I asked Vera and Gabriel to take me to the place where their courtship began. They were neighbors and always met among the same group of neighborhood friends, and on this street, among those friends, they had their first kiss. When we got to the sidewalk of this street, Vera and Gabriel did the first scene of the film in which you see their shadows moving, see the two touching one another, and then see them kissing. Right after they stopped kissing, a group of ten young people running in a conga line and singing children's folk songs appeared and began to run around Vera and Gabriel. That moment was magic, as if the old neighbors of their youth had come to life to help them tell the story of the moment their love began to sprout.<sup>4</sup>

That this information is omitted from the film adds to the dreamlike quality the director sought to convey (COSTA, 2011b). For instance, the viewer cannot tell that the first scene of the film was shot at the same time and place as this scene, nor that either scene took place on a street in the city of Belo Horizonte. The fortuitous event of the conga line of young people coincides with and shapes the mood of the film. As Vera and Gabriel stand in the middle of the circle of joyful dancers, we hear Vera's voice recounting the story of her and Gabriel's courtship in a voiceover. If Vera had told this story while we watched her sitting alone in a room, we might have considered it nostalgic. However, such nostalgia is carefully avoided in *Olhos de ressaca*. We hear Vera's voice while watching her electrifying smile, and we see her husband holding her hand in a bright outdoor scene of dancing. Vera is not telling the story of something long past, but of a love that endures.

The way the scene shifts between unfocused and focused images, and between images and solid white, calls to mind how we perceive the world when spinning

<sup>4</sup>In Portuguese: "Durante a filmagem eu pedi para Vera e Gabriel me levarem para o lugar onde tinham começado a namorar. Os dois eram vizinhos e sempre se encontravam entre a turma da vizinhança e nesta rua, entre a turma, deram seu primeiro beijo. Quando chegamos na calçada desta rua Vera e Gabriel fizeram a cena inicial do filme em que se vê a sombra deles caminhando, os dois se tocando e em seguida se beijando. Logo que eles pararam de se beijar apareceu um grupo de dez jovens correndo em um tipo de trenzinho cantando músicas folclóricas infantis e começaram a correr em volta de Vera e Gabriel. Esse momento foi mágico, pois foi como se os antigos vizinhos da juventude tivessem tomado corpo para ajudar a contar a história daquele momento que o amor deles começou a brotar."

or dancing in circles. It is a phantasmagoric mixture of memory and reality, a mixture of clear flashes amid fogginess. This visual imagery reflects the present while Vera's voice draws us into the past. The first scene's eerie electronic sounds, which were inspired by the song "Boga" by the Icelandic band Amiina and mixed by Fil Pinheiro specifically for *Olhos de ressaca*, return (COSTA, 2011b). While romantic music might have rendered the scene affected, the arresting electronic sounds force us to see in Vera and Gabriel more than caricatures of a happy old couple.

Costa's method of mixing disconnected sounds and images and of allowing for temporal regressions evokes the non-linear aspects of memory. To understand what is innovative about this method it is helpful to compare it to the more traditional interview format used in many documentaries. Referring to the reliance on the traditional interview format in Brazilian documentaries of the 1980s and 1990s, scholars Consuelo Lins and Cláudia Mesquita highlight the aesthetic consequences of this dependence on one mode of expression. The consequences include the dominance of words and speech (what Lins and Mesquita refer to as the verbalizable or *verbalizável*); the repetition of the same spatial configuration of the traditional interview setup; the absence of interactions among protagonists; and a lack of scenes in which we observe the protagonists in real, quotidian, or relevant situations that involve action (2008, p. 30 and 66-67). In contrast, *Olhos de ressaca*, like many Brazilian documentaries of the new millennium, escapes from the traditional interview format to tell a story. Had Costa modeled her documentary after traditional interviews, in which the camera focused solely on the interviewees, she would not have been able to achieve such a dreamlike and visceral treatment of memory. Thus, Costa simultaneously expresses specific memories and, more broadly, reflects on the nonlinear and imprecise process of remembering.

## The way a couple's intimacy changes over time

Part of what makes *Olhos de ressaca* compelling is its treatment of time, particularly of the way the couple's intimacy changes over time. This attention to temporal components puts *Olhos de ressaca* in dialogue with contemporaneous Brazilian documentaries. Referring to a series of Brazilian documentaries released between the years 2000 and 2006, Lins and Mesquita underscore the temporal richness of these documentaries that

[...] revive the temporal dimension of the Brazilian documentary that was practically nonexistent in the films based only on interviews. Time matters, produces effects, provokes changes in the relationships among the filmmakers and the characters and transformations in the life of those who are "observed" (2008, p. 33).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>In Portuguese: "[...] resgatam para o documentário brasileiro uma dimensão temporal praticamente inexistente nos filmes baseados apenas em entrevistas. O tempo conta, produz efeitos,

Moreover, in *Olhos de ressaca* the temporal dimension is accentuated by the inclusion of old photographs and film footage of the couple, ranging from childhood images, to their wedding, to home videos of their own young children. However, since we often do not know which family member is being depicted — or even what generation for that matter — the archival images have the effect of evoking life cycles and family bonds more broadly, as opposed to certain individuals' characteristics.

In a scene toward the end of the film, Vera explicitly discusses her experience of love changing over time. Throughout the documentary, both characters discuss the process of aging, consider the limitations of the body, and acknowledge that death could now come at any time. While previous scenes suggest that the couple's intimacy is still intact, this particular scene focuses more on how that intimacy changes over time. We hear Vera's voice in a voiceover and see two contemporary visual images of the couple: the first depicts the couple swinging on swings and the second captures a nighttime scene with candles. Although we are looking at a different visual, we hear Vera's voice in a voiceover and know that Gabriel is beside her as she speaks because we hear him laugh and interject. Both the image of the couple swinging and the image of them behind the candlelight offer a visual portrayal of the tenderness they feel toward one another after years of marriage. This tenderness has eclipsed an earlier passion, as Vera explains in the voiceover:

We no longer have that passion we once had, no? We still feel that tenderness for one another. And it's a true tenderness — pure, very soft, very pleasant — that encourages us to keep going with everything.<sup>6</sup>

The candles they blow out have burned practically all the way down to the candlesticks, yet the couple is smiling. The burning candles simultaneously call to mind celebration and death. Although Vera previously spoke of the past, here she addresses the present. The documentary oscillates between past and present, as is masterfully demonstrated by a scene of two slides of family portraits held up to the light and overlapped, so that light shines through them and they morph, thus collapsing two moments in time into one.

## Conclusion

Demographers and anthropologists suggest that for more than ninety-nine per cent of human history, the average human life span has been about thirty years.

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provoca mudanças nas relações entre cineastas e personagens, transformações na vida daqueles que são "observados."

<sup>6</sup>In Portuguese: "Nós não temos aquela paixão do início, né? A gente tem ainda aquele carinho com o outro. E é um carinho mesmo assim puro, muito suave, muito agradável que dá estímulo pra gente de continuar tudo."

Even in modern, industrialized countries in the nineteenth century, it was not common to live past the age of sixty. Yet, with advances in technology, nutrition, and medical care, we have seen tremendous and rapid growth in life expectancy. Policymakers have noted many implications of this demographic shift, but Costa highlights an element that has been — perhaps unconsciously, or perhaps consciously — overlooked: the intimacy of the elderly.

*Olhos de ressaca* is not the only documentary to capture the intimacy of Brazil's elderly. Dutch filmmaker Heddy Honigmann's documentary about the erotic poetry of Brazilian writer Carlos Drummond de Andrade focuses on elderly people's memories of erotic experiences via a series of interviews with and poetry readings by elderly people in Rio de Janeiro. Named after the posthumous anthology of Drummond's erotic poetry, Honigmann's *O amor natural* (*Natural Love*, 1996) centers much more on sex and memories of sex than *Olhos de ressaca*. While Honigmann's film is grounded in memories of past erotic experiences — as is exemplified by the stories the interviewees tell — Costa's film captures a subtler physical intimacy. Both documentaries act against a prejudice toward elderly sensuality, especially apparent in visual media, which tends to exclusively focus on youthful intimacy. The films create opportunities for elderly Brazilians to be candid and often humorous about their physical intimacy. In *Olhos de ressaca*, Vera jokes that she was so fertile in her early years that all you had to do was put her next to a pair of men's underwear and she would become pregnant. In *Amor natural*, men in a barbershop delight in the erotic wordplay of Drummond's poem "Bundamel bundalis bundacor bundamor" ("Honeybum, Lilybum, Colorbum, Lovebum"). However, as this article's epigraph suggests, Drummond's poems about family, memory, and the passage of time capture the essence of *Olhos de ressaca* more than his erotic poems. As in the stanza cited in the epigraph, Costa captures the "jeito dos corpos" ("play of bodies"), reminding the viewer that an elderly body is full of surprises.

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## Resumo/Abstract/Resumen

### A intimidade das pessoas idosas no documentário *Olhos de Ressaca*, de Petra Costa

**Sophia Beal**

Este artigo analisa como a curta-metragem *Olhos de ressaca* (2009), da cineasta brasileira Petra Costa, frisa um tópico frequentemente esquecido e muitas vezes tabu: a intimidade na terceira idade. Em termos temáticos e estéticos, o documentário de Costa sonda a intimidade de dois indivíduos na casa dos 80 anos e casados há décadas. O filme incorpora a gama completa desse período da vida mais

abertamente do que tem sido habitual no cinema. A abordagem atenta e imaginativa de Costa com o tema se desenvolve nas tomadas da pele, na incorporação de memórias e na forma em que a intimidade do casal muda ao longo do tempo.

**Palavras-chave:** documentário brasileiro, cinema brasileiro, idoso, sensualidade do idoso, Petra Costa.

## **Elderly intimacy in Petra Costa's Documentary**

### **Sophia Beal**

This article analyses how Brazilian director Petra Costa's 2009 short documentary *Olhos de Ressaca* brings to the fore a frequently forgotten, often taboo topic: the intimacy of the elderly. Costa's film thematically and aesthetically explores the intimacy of a couple in their eighties who have been married for decades. The documentary covers the full range of this period of life in a more open way than has been customary in film. Costa's attentive and imaginative engagement with the topic is displayed in the film's portrayal of skin, memory, and the way a couple's intimacy changes over time.

**Keywords:** Brazilian documentary, Brazilian film, the elderly, elderly sensuality, Petra Costa.

## **La intimidad de los ancianos en el documental *Olhos de Ressaca*, de Petra Costa**

### **Sophia Beal**

El artículo analiza cómo el cortometraje *Olhos de ressaca* (2009), de la cineasta brasileña Petra Costa, trata un tópico frecuentemente olvidado y muchas veces tabú: la intimidad en la tercera edad. En términos temáticos y estéticos, el documental de Costa sondea la intimidad de dos individuos con más de ochenta años que han estado casados durante décadas. El documental trata la gama completa de este período de la vida más abiertamente de lo que ha sido habitual en el cine. El enfoque atento e imaginativo de Costa con el tema se muestra en las tomas de la piel, en la incorporación de memorias y en la forma en que la intimidad de una pareja cambia con el tiempo.

**Palabras clave:** documental brasileño, cine brasileño, anciano, sensualidad del anciano, Petra Costa.