

A Portrait of Bete Mendes and Deise Tigrone

— Grant Watson

The films of Wendelien van Oldenborgh often explore polyphony, the sound of different voices speaking in an agonistic space, where contact or conflict makes for a historically nuanced account of contemporary culture. The scene is frequently set through particular buildings or locations that have a charge—by eluding to a colonial past, maybe, or a labour dispute—in museums, factories, schools and radio stations. Working with groups of people as protagonists the artist carefully engineers a situation that is nevertheless open enough to allow for a collaborative script to emerge.

In *Bete and Deise* (2012) this range of voices is reduced to the two women whose names appear in the title. Both iconic Brazilian entertainers—but of very different kinds—performing themselves, they carry the narrative forward; their conversation, as well as their physical presence, engage the viewer in a layered encounter of contemporary Brazil. Bete Mendes is an actress in her sixties who has achieved fame through her roles in telenovelas—the hugely popular television soap operas that draw mass audiences in Brazil with their labyrinthine plots and shameless melodrama. In addition, and perhaps slightly at odds with this, is her political activism, which from her own account plays an equal if not more important role in her life story. Bete sees her work in television as something that has given her the platform to pursue social justice, which, starting as a young woman in the late 1960s, meant fighting the military dictatorship that governed Brazil from 1964 to 1985. This placed her amongst a group of artists, intellectuals and entertainers (also including Caetano Veloso and Chico Buarque) who spoke out as popular figures against the regime, and who, through their resistance, faced exile or imprisonment. Bete herself was jailed as well as tortured in prison. Clearly a point of pride for Bete, her work in politics is continuously addressed and becomes one of the main threads running through the conversation. While Bete has the self-assurance of a famous actress, a politician and member of the elite, Deise Tigrone (Great Tiger) is very definitely from the other side of the tracks. In her late twenties, the oldest of nine children, she explains that she grew up in the Favela do Coroado in Rio de Janeiro, and how she had worked as a maid for a ‘rich woman’ before breaking through to become an important figure in funk carioca (baile funk, as it is often known outside Brazil), a genre of dance music emerging from the working class culture of 1980s Rio.

Reflecting in the film on the social chasm between the two of them, Bete says—either out of resignation or respect—that there is no basis for comparison or approximation. But despite this, inevitably, their interaction becomes the locus for such a comparison. As they move about the interior of a house in Rio which is under construction and which, with its rough structure, different levels, and atmospheric lighting, appears like a theatre set, we watch with fascination as they negotiate the barriers of age, class, race and education. As viewers we continuously mine their words and gestures for clues that might reveal how they really feel about each other. And they do have certain things in common. They are both performers and strong women working in the entertainment industry. They both occupy if not directly articulate a feminist position. Both have experienced risk—Bete under the dictatorship and Deise as an ongoing part of her life in the favela. Both identify themselves as political, although in different ways, and both have agreed to appear in the film.

Bete and Deise is a deliberately fragmented work, in terms of its choreography, staging, chronology and camera. At times, conversations are edited together out of sequence. We can hear this in the non-sequiturs—it isn't clear where the conversational threads begin and end—and sometimes we see it in the odd transitions from day to night. Everybody seems to be moving all of the time, including the hand-held camera, which restlessly looks for a focus but refuses to settle. This resistance to providing a definitive portrait forces the viewer to generate his or her own interpretation of both the women and their relationship to one another. We get a lot of information, not only from what they say but also from their clothing and body language; even before we hear about their life stories, a set of class distinctions is established. Deise's look, with its platform sandals and hair extensions, is from the street, while Bete, in her white linen trousers, silk blouse and craft jewellery, appears affluent. They move about the set differently: Bete with the gravitas of someone traversing the halls of power, Deise sometimes ill at ease, moving towards the windows and gazing out like a *namoradeira* (a form of popular sculpture, especially in Minas Gerais, depicting a young woman waiting for her lover).

Perhaps to alleviate her discomfort, Deise frequently adopts the role of interviewer, even concluding at the end of the film that 'I don't have anything more to ask', as if this role is the premise of their meeting. In her series of polite, possibly rehearsed questions, Deise appears to defer to Bete as the senior figure—or maybe she is simply deflecting attention. It is possible that Deise is in awe of Bete, as someone who participated in a historical drama that she knows to be important but which happened before her time. Bete, for her part, responds by adopting a pedagogic tone. While kindly meant, this can be patronising, even bordering on the oppressive. As the film opens, Bete asks Deise: 'do you understand?' Meanwhile, audible beneath these words, we hear Deise breathing rhythmically and whispering her insecurity as well as her sexual preoccupations like a mantra of self-possession. In another scene Deise sits on a chair while Bete speaks to her as if to a classroom, repeatedly saying 'do you understand?' until Deise cuts her off with a terse affirmative. Bete's story is nevertheless impressive, an account from the history books told with the dramatic skills of a television performer. It includes the description of a rally of thousands of people in support of the metal workers, where Bete stood on stage beside Lula da Silva with military helicopters circling overhead, their guns trained on the speakers; as well as accounts of being arrested, imprisoned and tortured, and surviving all of this because of her work as an actress.

'If you like I can tell you my story' Deise says in response, as if the offer is uncalled for. Despite this trepidation Deise proceeds to narrate and affirm her own experience, which, if not socially sanctioned like Bete's, is still, in her own words, 'impressive'. She begins by describing the dimensions of her mother's house, which could fit into a small section of the building site where the filming takes place. Her childhood home was not only small, it was noisy, being right next to a music hall where funk carioca was played so loud that her mother's pots and pans rattled and fell off the shelves. Soon Deise herself is participating in the funk carioca balls where hundreds of people assemble in groups to compete, in scenes that often slip into violence. Having been invited to perform, Deise broke with convention by writing lyrics about the television actress Hilda Furacão, a transgressive and sexually expressive figure.

Deise's breakthrough comes with a song called 'Injeção' ('Injection'), which tackles the subject of anal sex using the double entendre of being pricked by a doctor with a hypodermic needle, recounting her experience of being penetrated in various other ways and in multiple positions in a hotel room one night. As she describes this, Deise shifts between speaking and singing—moving to the music in her head she is transported into her role of the carioca singer—particularly in the neighbourhood-shaking performance where she shouts 'this pussy is mine' repeatedly from a rooftop (serving as a make-shift stage). While Deise comes in and out of character as a funky carioca star, Bete's performance is more even and assured—in that we suspect she is always acting. Bete brings something of the telenovela with her, in particular through the frequent tears that well up, provoking sympathy in the viewer but also, perhaps, suspicion. She cries when she speaks about how artists should use their position to bring politics to the people in a way that suggests she is romanticising herself. She looks up as a helicopter flies overhead and gives Deise a meaningful glance, as if signalling the trauma that this sound still evokes. But there is a point in the film when, following a particularly emphatic appeal for Deise to politicise herself, she seems suddenly exhausted. With teary eyes, rocking backwards and forwards, she appears genuinely neurotic and unhappy.

In the way that Bete and Deise listen to each other we see empathy mixed with judgment, a tension that energises the encounter. The film avoids becoming the vehicle for surmounting their mutually acknowledged differences—there are too many hurdles in that path—but instead is an account of two divergent, potentially agonistic, potentially sympathetic practices. 'I am a political beast' says Bete as she extols the virtues of citizenship and its rights and responsibilities, including the protection of workers such as maids through employment registration. She is questioning and incredulous when Deise admits that she is not registered as a singer. Deise, for her part, seems to lack any clearly defined notion of citizenship. Perhaps because, as a poor black woman living in a favela, the state is largely represented by the police. Whereas for Bete the idea of the state as a brutal opponent is something relegated to the past, perhaps for Deise this experience still holds true.

We sense that Deise's ideas of belonging involve things such as participating in the culture of the ball, recognition as a singer, or even the solidarity sketched out in her mention of English-Sri Lankan singer MIA who sampled 'Injeção' in one of her tracks, which went on to become an international hit. Acknowledging that she is 'still fighting' Deise identifies her role in funk carioca as political, in terms of her struggle to make the experience of a poor black woman visible in the public domain—including her many overt references to sexuality.

Despite her respectful attention to Bete stories, Deise nevertheless has a critical take on them, and at a certain point asks a question that reveals how differently she views the political. Concerning the telenovelas, she asks Bete if she was ever able to improvise outside the scripts given to her, to which Bete replies with a definitive 'no, never'. For Deise this runs counter to her own experience of extending the subject matter and expressive range of funk carioca in a way that is acknowledged as courageous and subversive. This question also suggests that Deise is alert to the paradoxical relationship between Bete's acting career and political identifications—not that she is disparaging popular culture and setting it apart from politics, quite the reverse in fact. What also

underlies this question is the schizophrenic relationship Bete must have had with her erstwhile employer, the television station Rede Globo, which was allied to the dictatorship and continues to identify with the Brazilian right. But perhaps more important for Deise is the content of the telenovelas, that address social themes but maintain social norms. These norms include the widespread inequality and internalised racism of Brazilian society—seen, for example, in the telenovelas’ exclusion of black actors from significant roles where they might appear as empowered citizens. For Bete, addressing inequality and racism are battles that she has fought through the political system and the Workers’ Party; her life as an actress working for Globo appears to represent a tension rather than a betrayal. But what Deise seems to be getting at is the possibility of using television itself as a medium to achieve cultural transformation in the way that she uses funk carioca. For Bete, we suspect that this cultural change is something that would have to be orchestrated by the Ministry of Culture.

Bete is incredulous that Deise is not unionised and Deise wonders why Bete didn’t pursue politics through television. Both these evaluations are no doubt based on mutual misunderstandings, and in reality Bete and Deise represent two equally important aspects of the struggle to achieve greater equity in Brazil: for women, for racial minorities and for the poor, a project that as Bete observes is very much ‘in progress’. There are many reasons why this is the case. In her 2004 preface to *Molecular Revolution in Brazil* Suely Rolnik describes the multiple forces at work—not only in the process of re-democratising after two decades of military dictatorship, but also combatting the residue of Brazil’s five-hundred-year history in which ‘colonial, slave holding, dictatorial and capitalist’ elements are ‘overlaid to form a perverse, powerfully established social hierarchy’ so that the country is ranked ‘near the top of the world’s most unequal societies.’ For Rolnik these forces of emancipation include the ‘state/party/union formula’ that can give structural support to the underprivileged, but also the politics of subjectivity and desire made visible through speech, gesture and attitude, which constitute ‘interwoven threads of a social fabric’ that have to be understood as separate but related parts of a whole. Without wishing to reduce Bete and Deise to ciphers that represent these two political domains, their narratives can be nevertheless read as such. Bete with her emphasis on the structures of the macro-political, and Deise through her involvement in the micro-political questions of how it is possible to appear and what it is possible to say. Through these two characters, the film establishes a dialectic that allows us to explore what these politics mean on the ground.

Within the limits of this encounter Bete and Deise make something like an attempt at solidarity, and seem to have moments of affinity as well as estrangement. In their different ways they appear as impressive, courageous and knowledgeable, and we sense that they could indeed learn a lot from each other. It would be good for Deise to join a union to help her, to avoid being ripped off (as it turns out she was by MIA) if nothing else, and perhaps there are residual if unconscious prejudices that Bete needs to work through. By the end of this compelling and beautifully handled double portrait, it is still unclear what impact the short time they have spent together has had on them, and what they really think of each other—in part, you sense, because the question is left unresolved, but also because, as Deise at one point reflects, there are certain things that can’t be expressed.