

## Document Citation

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**A Talking Picture.** (BUYING & BOOKING GUIDE)(Movie Review) *Maria Garcia.*

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KINO INTERNATIONAL/Color/1.85/Dolby Digital/95 Mins./Not Rated

Cast: Leonor Silveira, John Malkovich, Catherine Deneuve, Stefania Sandrelli, Irene Papas, Filipa de Almeida, Luis Miguel Cintra, David Cardoso, Elias Logothetis.

Credits: Written and directed by Manoel de Oliveira. Produced by Paulo Branco. Director of photography: Emmanuel Machuel. Production designer: Ze Branco. Edited by Valerie Loiseleux. Costume designer: Isabel Branco. A Madragoa Filmes/Gemini Films/Mikado Film/France 2 Cinema co-production. In Portugese with English subtitles.

Ninety-six-year-old Portuguese director Manoel de Oliveira illustrates, in *A Talking Picture*, that he still knows how to make pictures "talk": This deceptively simple film exposes civilization's flimsy protective veneer. 05-21

As Rosa Maria (Leonor Silveira) and her eight-year-old daughter Maria Joana (Filipa de Almeida) travel from their home in Lisbon to the familiar historical sites of Western Europe, *A Talking Picture* is precisely that: shots of tourist destinations such as Pompeii and Athens, narrated by Rosa Maria, who happens to be a history professor. Myths, legends and Western history are blended into a pleasant travelogue complete with Rosa Maria's awkward, extemporaneous conversations with fellow tourists. The voyage, by steamer, is her first experience of the places she previously knew only as a scholar and teacher. As she and her daughter move from the Occidental world east to the Orient, from sites of Christian worship to the soaring minarets of Islam, it becomes impossible to escape the feeling that they are embarked on a titanic voyage.

*A Talking Picture*, frankly anachronistic in its complete reliance on vignettes intercut with the swiftly moving bow of the steamer, is easy to dismiss as visually insouciant. The camera rarely pans, and de Oliveira (*I'm Going Home*), the 96-year-old Portuguese filmmaker, often minimizes breathtaking sites, like Vesuvius, by photographing them from a car window or from the most conventional angle imaginable. His genius, though, lies in his unwavering fealty to matching style with content. The edge of the frame circumscribes reality, knowledge, the known world,

since the characters never venture beyond it. Rosa Maria, who knows the places she visits only from the pages of books, duplicates her experience of them by confining herself to quick snapshot stopovers.

By limiting perspective, essentially refusing to move the camera or to indicate the existence of reality outside the frame, outside of Rosa Maria's intellectual experience, de



Oliveira establishes that sense of impending danger which haunts *A Talking Picture*. Although the writer-director removes himself entirely from the narrative through this *mise-en-scene*, his presence is felt in the scenes in which the captain of the ship (played unconvincingly by John Malkovich) and three prominent ladies engage in prattle reminiscent of Luis Bunuel's scathing satires of the bourgeoisie. Despite the unmistakable charm of the ladies--Irene Papas, Catherine Deneuve and Stefania Sandrelli--their conversation transforms the detached pedantry of Rosa Maria into nationalistic babble. Ironically, neither the ladies' provincial views of history, nor Rosa Maria's academic understanding of it, prepares them for what awaits as they cross from the Red Sea into the Gulf of Aden.

Captain Walesa, equally blinded by a belief in his own liberalism and worldly sophistication--which allows him to successfully host a polyglot dinner party--imagines he is immune to the dangerous currents of world events. While the ship is docked in Aden, the site of the USS Cole bombing, he buys a gift for Maria Joana: a doll in conservative Muslim dress. No one at the dinner table, including the newly invited Rosa Maria, views the gift as ominous, but shortly after the captain presents it he is called away by a member of the crew. An emergency has arisen.

*A Talking Picture* is de Oliveira's allegorical sketch of contemporary Western civilization, a devastatingly simple portrait of the ways in which we lull ourselves into believing that knowledge, academic or worldly, is our inviolate defense against annihilation. But as the writer-director illustrates, neither the veneer of refinement or enlightenment, nor a perspicuous understanding of history, can protect any of us from the nihilism of those for whom history does not exist. The Rosa Marias of the world have had their moment, and the moment has passed: In the Gulf of Aden, we are compelled to look beyond the frame of the pictures in our historical album.

**Named Works:** *A Talking Picture* (Motion picture) - Movie reviews



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