



Mélanie van der Hoorn



SPOTS IN SHOTS



Narrating the Built  
Environment in Short Films

nai010





# Sizígia

Country	Director
PT	Luis Urbano
Year	Duration
2012	17:44

*Sizígia* is poetic, meditative, and also exciting and surprising. The film begins with just sound: water, wind, squawking gulls. Then a beach with rocks, with a wall among them; low clouds in a blue sky. In the distance, a man in a yellow raincoat is hosing and scrubbing the wall (or are they rocks?). The sound of his brush swells, and two minutes after the start of the film the title appears: *Sizígia* ('syzygy'), a combination of sun and moon that determines the tides. Immediately afterwards, the sharp tip of a building in raw concrete and the same man, now dressed in overalls, with a bucket and headphones. We follow him along more rocks and concrete: corridors, roof terraces. Amidst the gulls we now hear the voices of children. Standing inside are huge brown boilers, connected by thick pipes with heavy metal screws. The man walks to a small wooden table and swaps his Walkman for a cassette recorder. He turns out to be a sound poet who plays acoustic memories of the building that he stores in small boxes: 'Swimming pool, July 1999', 'Swimming pool, August 1999', 'Swimming pool, September 1999', ...

This building is the Piscinas das Marés ('tidal swimming pool') in Leça de Palmeira, designed in 1966 by Álvaro Siza. *Sizígia* is the first film by Luis Urbano, an architecture lecturer at the University of Porto. From 2011 to 2014 he headed the project *Silent Rupture: Intersections between Architecture and Cinema*. It examines the 1960s and 1970s, the final decades of the Portuguese dictatorship. Film and architecture were both critical of the regime, and as sister disciplines clearly interested

in each other. The urban environment was a central element in the Cinema Novo (the new Portuguese cinema), and framing and movement played a major role in the increasingly 'filmic' architecture. '[A] clear boundary between architecture and cinema may not even exist. There's no line, but a borderless yet identifiable territory instead' (Urbano, Ferreira & Rosmaninho 2013:1). Urbano and his team discovered that film can influence how architecture is not only perceived but also realized. They wrote down their findings and—highly unusual in an academic context—started to work with film themselves. They made ten short feature films about buildings that embody the new Portuguese architecture of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>1</sup>

1 The findings of *Silent Rupture* were compiled and published as *JackBackPack* ([www.jackbackpack.org](http://www.jackbackpack.org)). The first (and to date only) issue of *Jack: Journal on Architecture and Cinema* appeared in 2013. *Back* was a collective name for the book publications, and *Pack* for the film productions. In addition, *Silent Rupture* organized in 2013 an international conference entitled *Inter[Sections]. A Conference on Architecture, City and Cinema* (Urbano, ed., 2013). See also Urbano 2013.

2 The later *A casa do lado* (PT 2012, Luis Urbano, 15:52) also clearly illustrates how film can be deployed to convey stories about architecture. Within *Silent Rupture*, the following films were also shot: 29-A (PT 2013, Circo de Ideias, 14:32), *A encomenda* (PT 2013, Manuel Graça Dias, 18:15), *A limpeza* (PT 2013, Manuel Graça Dias, 19:32), *Insua* (PT 2013, Ana Resende, Miguel C. Tavares & Rui Manuel Vieira, 25:22), *Luto* (PT 2013, Tiago Costa, 15:24), *Panorama* (PT 2013, Francisco Ferreira, 21:11), *Como se desenha uma casa* (PT 2014, Luis Urbano, 19:29), *Mercado* (PT 2014, Carlos Machado & Ricardo Santos, 18:40), *Sagrado* (PT 2014, Nuno Grande, 28:29).

For Urbano, the choice for fiction may have been obvious, but that is not the case in architecture. The fear is that the built environment might just get lost behind the story. Even Urbano's immediate colleagues initially saw more potential in a 'more neutral' form of documentation. But he refuses to see film as a (passive) representation of architecture—for him it is an (active) exploration. The swimming pool in Leça de Palmeira is familiar to many Portuguese people, and through his film Urbano wanted them to experience the place in a new way. That's why he deliberately filmed in the low season, when the only person at the pool is the caretaker (his fictitious alter ego in the film). The building tells a story through his actions and movements. First it's exciting. We follow the man without knowing what he's doing or how he's connected to the place. Later the mood becomes more contemplative and sensory. We think we feel the wind, smell the sea breeze. *Sizígia* is an ode to sound, to the acoustic









experience of architecture. The actual amount of information is very limited. The film contains no text, and it isn't until the credits that the name of the building is revealed. That lends the place a timeless quality. Everybody can interpret the ending in their own way. What is the man looking at? What's he thinking about? What does he feel? The film invites the viewer, carries him along, and then lets him experience the place personally.<sup>2</sup>

The films of Urbano and *Silent Rupture* display courage and originality. The combination of academic research and filmmaking is unique and invigorating; the choice for fiction is innovative. As architects, the filmmakers want to convey an experience of the built environment. They deploy film to serve architecture. Yet conversely, architecture feeds their stories and is one of the leading performers. *Silent Rupture* also wanted to reach viewers

who have no particular interest in architecture. The expectation was that it would be easier to achieve that with fiction than with documentaries. And indeed, *Sizígia* was an instant success and soon gained a following outside the profession. It even won a Special Jury Prize in the Lab Competition at the 2013 International Short Film Festival in Clermont-Ferrand.<sup>3</sup> For Urbano, it meant 'recognition that it was a film, not just a film about architecture'.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *Sizígia* also won First Prize for International Fiction at the Architecture Film Festival in Santiago in 2012, the Special Jury Prize at the International Short Film Festival Corto-Actuario in Santa Marinella in 2013, and First Prize at the Shortcutz Film Festival in Porto in 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Luis Urbano on 15 October 2016.