

OF CROCODILES AND LOVE LETTERS

Colonial Memories
In Portuguese Film

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Somos o que fomos.
We are what we were.

António Lobo Antunes
(Inscription grafted onto the wall
of the 3315 Artillery Company Barracks, Torres Vedras)

Some of my earliest memories as a child are linked to yellow pieces of paper where I scribbled mysterious messages, which I was told were sent to someone far away. The aerograms, sponsored by Salazar's "National Feminine Movement", an organization of the Portuguese *Estado Novo*, were the main mail medium between the Portuguese military fighting in Africa and their relatives back home, in the metropolis, as the nation was then called. And here there was really no mystery, for the obscure receiver of the doodles was my father. A Navy Officer, he fought on all three fronts of what the government called the African War or Overseas War, what public opinion named the Colonial War and the African freedom fighters considered the War of Independence. Whatever the name, this war lasted from 1961 till 1974, and involved the deployment of 148.000 troops to Angola, Mozambique and Guinea Bissau. For Portuguese soldiers, the death toll was 82289 and 16000 were left with permanent disability. In addition, roughly 50000 African combatants were killed. For the regular military, tours of duty had no limit. As a regular officer in the Navy, my father was shipped to Mozambique less than a year after I was born, for a 30 months tour of duty. Other than the aerograms, the earliest memories of my father are photos and Super 8 home films sent through the mail. Before having a body, for me he was an image, an image that closed the gap of absence, the hiatus of experience. This was an absence that was never to be regained and that haunted him all his life. Africa and that which he observed were unspoken of. The war was barely ever mentioned.

In the Navy's way, his war diaries speak with the objectivity of a logbook, presenting a record of time and space, no operational details, and certainly no emotionally laden confessions. For 30 months, the diary maps the routine, the boredom, the spaces. No emotional outbursts, those were kept for the love letters he sent to my mother. The diaries are numb, emotionless, but once... On the 28th month of his engagement, he scribbles a cry: "I suffer..."

Writing about the experience of the first world war in a small essay published in the Czech journal *Welt im Wort* and titled "Erfahrung und Armut"

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¹“Ouve-se falar, reclama-se lá fora em altos gritos a independência de Angola, mas Angola é uma criação portuguesa e não existe sem Portugal.”

(Experience and Poverty), Walter Benjamin diagnosed as an effect of the war the imposition of a symbolical pauperism, which paradoxically gave rise to a sense of deprivation in the utterance of experience (Benjamin, GSII, 217). After literature in the 1980's, film is arguably the artistic practice that has more successfully worked to produce phatic shards effective in getting the conversation over the Portuguese Colonial war and colonialism started. They do not particularly mend the hiatus in symbolization, but give visibility to the gap. Arguably, these visual shards also work to derealize a (falsely) remembered past. The process of memory assemblage resorts to the loaded colonial imagery to trigger the interpellation, at the same time as it contrapunctually repeats that very same imagery to undo it. It is this tension in the mnemonic process seeking to fill the poverty of the unutterable experience that structures the journey from love letters to crocodiles and back.

1. THE AFRICAN ECTOPLASM

The Portuguese dictator António de Oliveira Salazar spoke in a hawkish address to the nation in 1963 about the widening conflict in the African colonies. It had begun two years earlier in the north of Angola and quickly spread to Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique. In the Spring of African autonomy, Salazar was also reacting to international pressure to decolonize. In an emotionally coloured speech broadcasted on August 12, 1963, he said: “There are cries beyond our borders for Angola’s independence. But Angola is a Portuguese invention and does not exist without Portugal.”¹ (Salazar, 2016, p. 267).

The citation is a symptom, a symptom of the derealization of the colonial space, in fact of the regime’s inability to conceive of Africa other than as the ghostly form of an imperial creation. And yet, men have died for this mind image visualized in speeches and constructed in pictures and films.

A propaganda photo book, the *Overseas Itinerary (Roteiro do Ultramar)* published in 1958 by the National Overseas Agency, opened with this statement: “Portugal neither begins nor ends in space or in time.” (Gonçalves, 1958, p. VII). The utterance carries a double meaning. It is a literal reading of the *petite a complex*, that turned Africa into a supplemental fetish, allowing for the nation to construct itself as “larger than it actually was” (Lourenço in Gil & Martins, 2011), and also a symptom of the nation as a haunted and haunting entity, a ghost without infrastructure, energized by the ectoplasm of the colonies.

The uncanny reading suggests that in fact the nation, just like Angola in

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²“O império *infinixistiu*-nos a título póstumo, porque ele não existiu numa dimensão real e, sobretudo, da consciência que o português tinha da existência e da realidade desse império, existiu-nos como fantasma, porque era o lugar em que Portugal era maior do que é na realidade [...] (Lourenço em Gil & Martins, 2011, p. 226).

the dictator’s speech, does not exist but as the psychic energy of disembodied figurations traveling across the ages. It is not only Angola that in this colonial nexus is an invention, but the very idea of Portugal. The ectoplasmic material suggests the nation cannot be known, because it cannot be subsumed to time and space. And it is in the nature of this spectral nexus, to resist containment. In this unreal setting, the nation and the empire become interchangeable signifiers, mutually constitutive in a string of ghostly returns, as Paulo de Medeiros has compellingly argued, revealing the hollowness of the metropolitan core (Medeiros, 2016). Portuguese philosopher Eduardo Lourenço has claimed Africa serves a prosthetic and posthumous purpose. He wrote “(...) the empire outlives us posthumously, because either in material form, or in the awareness of the Portuguese it has never been, it existed as a ghost, because it was the place where Portugal was indeed larger than it ever was² [...]” (Lourenço in Gil & Martins, 2011, p. 226).

From this ectoplasmic place, there can be no return. The embedding of the ghostly constructs of nation and empire connote an *Unheimlichkeit* in the Freudian sense, presenting an intrinsic unhomeliness at the core of the construct, and literally unpacking the very possibility of conceiving of an idea of home – which in this economy is but a by-product of a representation out of order. Secondly, the conflation of the two signifiers, suggests the very impossibility of conceiving a homely space for this mode of representation. The relation between Africa and Portugal connotes a disturbed homeliness. As in other situations, literature, presented an early diagnostic of this state of affairs. Writer António Lobo Antunes asks in *O Esplendor de Portugal (Portugal’s Splendour)* “How can there be a return home if there is no home?” Africa and most specifically the Portuguese African/Colonial war are shrouded in this ectoplasmic dimension, as uncanny projections of an unhomely reality. And yet, the bodies of the dead and wounded are proof enough the ghost has a body.

Etymologically, the ectoplasm seems strangely close to the very idea of film. The dictionary entry on ectoplasm in the *American Heritage Dictionary* defines it as: “The visible substance believed to emanate from the body of a spiritualistic medium during communication with the dead; An immaterial substance, especially the transparent corporeal presence of a spirit and ghost; Informal: an image projected onto a movie screen.” To speak of the ectoplasm, it seems, is to speak of film, connoting what Karen Beckman defines as its ghostly, insubstantial dimension (Beckman, 2003, p. 78), that thus throws the very idea of film’s materiality into crisis. The insubstantial medium becomes a *transitional object* in the clash between immaterial projections and the dire

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³ As I write this essay, Portuguese public opinion is in turmoil over the debate on colonial reparations to be paid to the former Portuguese colonies in the wake of President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa's speech to the foreign press club on April 24th 2024.

⁴ The memory of Portuguese colonialism, and most specifically the entanglements of public and private memories of this recent past has become a recurring theme in Portuguese contemporary artistic production. Second generation artists, many of which were born or lived in the previous colonies have been at the forefront of this approach. Some of its representatives are Vasco Araújo, Maria Lusitano, Pedro Barateiro, Francisco Vidal, amongst the youngest, and Ana Vidigal or Ângela Ferreira, as more prominently established artists.

reality of violence and uprooting, war and loss, carrying over the Portuguese historical transformation into democracy over the past 50 years. This transitional modulation has certainly not been uncontentious, as war cinematography has provided a visual conviction to the invisible and unspeakable while simultaneously accommodating a nostalgic drive. That is, film acts both to denounce and to promote the phantom of colonialism and empire.

The discussion about Portuguese colonialism is inextricably linked to the ways in which it has both represented itself and lent itself to representation. Today, the colonial past continues to be as supplemental to the self-representation of Portuguese identity as it was before what some still name “the loss of the colonies”. And yet, this supplement is undoubtedly ambivalent, thus giving vent to ground the representational wars along two somewhat contradictory lines. On the one hand, by conveying a colonial melancholia, that hangs on to the glory of an invented past and is unable to come to terms with the *schize* of separation. On the other, by fostering a critical nostalgia that has been growing amongst a generation of artists born after decolonization, longing to revise the traumatic silence over the violence of colonialism and war.³

In what follows I shall seek to unpack the ways in which Portuguese film, in particular two of the most recent and acclaimed films of the new generation of Portuguese filmmakers, Miguel Gomes' *Tabu* (2011) and Ivo Ferreira's *Letters from War* (2016), activate a metacritical comment on both the ectoplasm of empire and film's ambivalent role as a technology that enacts critique while aestheticizing and repeating the nostalgic figuration of the ghost of empire.

2. CINEMATIC RETURNS

Memorialization often entails a compulsive return to a scene of the past, a past bearing an unaccomplished promise of grandeur, and in the case of the Portuguese memory of empire built upon the cruel seduction of the subdued colonial other. But remembering, as psychoanalysis has taught us, connotes coming to terms with the inability to act, to coming to terms with the fact that the repressed event belongs and is part of the past. The compulsion to return, then, which young Portuguese second generation artists rehearse in their work on colonialism entails the desire to overcome the contradictions of this past, while uttering a fantasmatic gesture of restitution in memory.⁴

This is an unstable construct lending itself to critique as it retains a perverse seductive allure, a compulsive return, that as Freud wrote in *Beyond*

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⁵I use the term "revisionist", as inaugurated by feminist critics, to refer to the critical reappropriation of contents of the past, dislocating them from hegemonic mainstream discourse. See Gil, 2023.

the Pleasure Principle, may be a neurotic conservative act of restitution of an earlier state of affairs (Freud, 1989, p. 612). Nonetheless, the act avows to the perverse and atrocious nature of that past. The return then becomes a "slapstick reiteration" (Berlant, 2011, p. 24) of a distorted scene. A scene where the idealistic suggestion of fulfilment is thwarted by the conscious recognition of its atrocious nature. This recognition, however, is resisted by an affective operation of attachment continuously suggesting that the impossible actual return may be possible.

Let me now turn to Portuguese director Miguel Gomes' acclaimed Berlinale Award winning film *Tabu* (2011) as a case in point of the compulsive return to the toxic colonial past and its enduring presence in contemporary artistic production. It is my contention that it performs, what may be called an affective operation of critique, sustained in a cruel, that is unpleasurable, relation with the object of colonial experience. In fact, it utters the inability to uncouple the present from the contradictory trap of colonial desire and its operation of cruel seduction. Then, I shall move to Ivo Ferreira's *Letters from War* (2016), based on António de Lobo Antunes' letters to his first wife, Maria José, written in 1972 and 1973, during his tour of duty as drafted military physician on the Angolan war front. Whereas Gomes' nostalgic critique of a melancholic crocodile captures the weight of remembrance in an aging empire and the traps of contemporary memorialization of the ghostly return of the caravels, producing what postcolonial critic Paulo de Medeiros provocatively terms a play along with the imperial imaginary as an escapist fantasy in the austerity subdued Portugal (Medeiros, 2015, p. 210), Ivo Ferreira takes Lobo Antunes' singular figurations of a masculinity in crisis to reflect back on nation and identity. Finally, Maria Lusitano's *Nostalgia*, a video art project (2002), plays upon and combats nostalgia through a practice of interference in the grandeur of the colonial past. Aware of how much the work of nostalgia feeds on the changes brought about by evolving optical regimes over cultural identities, she uses her video work to produce a form of visual critical nostalgia, skilfully playing with the visual remnants of the last decades of Portuguese colonial domination in super-8 family videos, photographs, postcards and other illustrations. This is a concept that also applies to the work of Ivo Ferreira and Miguel Gomes.

By visual critical nostalgia, I mean revisionist work with visual materials which, by interrogating the past and its visual regime, will not succumb to pathological dislocation and blindness, but rather use the fragments of the past as a means of widening its visibility, in view of acquiring a new "sightfulness" (Fritzsche, 2002, p. 64).⁵ Critical nostalgia is produced by interrogating the past

while acknowledging the changing and changed conditions of the present. It works by recognizing the memory gaps, the different subjectivities at stake in the management of visual memories, by denouncing the hoax of transparency and indeed by using parody and appropriation as strategies to dislocate the morbid organicism of heritage, allowing for a critical and reflexive memory to emerge. As in Svetlana Boym's approach to reflexive nostalgia,⁶ visual critical nostalgia works to produce a place where the fragmented and paradoxical pieces of the past may be articulated from the perspective of the present, enlarging the visible scope of public visual discourse to encompass what was formerly out of sight.

3. CINEMATIC RETURNS

The work of colonialism stretches well beyond historical time and geography, though it is unquestionably grounded in particular time and space relations. Colonialism always means colonialisms and the one we will be talking about next has a Portuguese twist. To discuss the work of Portuguese colonialism in contemporary artistic practice is to reveal the cruel attachment to a contradictory past. A contradiction fostered by the simultaneous rational acknowledgement of the violence of colonialism and the unspoken attachment to a scene of fantasy, where an unconscious drive triggers a sense of would-be possibility. A scene, in fact, where the colonizer performs the role of a seductive villain, whose quest for pleasurable satisfaction ignites what Freud, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, considers the work of the reality principle, that is, the tolerance of displeasure with the aim of attaining pleasure. Portuguese contemporary art, and film in particular, have played with this double intent of fantasy and critique, attachment and disavowal, irony and a seductive slapstick reiteration of the colonial work.

This contrapunctual rhetoric becomes apparent in the continuous repetition of the lush imagery of Africa in most films about the Colonial War or the Portuguese presence in Africa. Even Manuel de Oliveira's numbing *Non, or the vain Glory of Command* (1990) cannot do without the fetishization of nature in the long opening shot of the old baobab tree announcing the coming into frame of the military truck – symptomatically named Chaimite, the Mozambican site of one of the most notorious battles in the Wars of Occupation in 1893.

Film repeats the failed desire of the colonizer for Africa, materialized in the interchangeable reification of the landscape, the African bodies and their

cultural practices and rituals. This is arguably a demonstration of what Lauren Berlant calls “cruel optimism”. According to Berlant this relation exists when “something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing” (Berlant, 2011, p. 1). In fact, not only does it suggest the possibility of fulfilment that is forever deferred, but it actually makes it impossible, as she writes, to attain the expansive transformation that is attached to this longing (Berlant, 2011, p. 2).

The compulsion to repeat the cycle of cruel seduction is dangerously close to a process of contradictory restitution, which illustrates critique and yet cannot disavow a certain desire to restore a primal scene of fantasy. Writer Lídia Jorge reflects precisely on the duality of this double-bind relation with Africa, at once marked by enchantment and trauma:

[...] I began to think that in Africa I was faced with two opposing realities: images of dashing beauty, of extraordinary opulence and grandeur, something primitive, strong, primordial, of a time when human beings resembled something I had imagined. A mix of naiveté and violence, a certain intense relationship with primitive nature, a sort of purity, which I thought was the encounter with ourselves in another stage, at another time. Leftovers of romanticism? It is possible. But that gave me a lot of joy, it created a fantastic memory, a good memory, which drove me to writing. However, there is another reality, a reality of oppression, with no way out. It was something aggressive, painful, which also drove me to write. It is a duality that sustains remembrance. (Jorge in Gil & Martins, 2011, p. 214)

Jorge writes about a duality that instigates writing, a romantic duality if you will, torn with ironic overtones, for it is the very subject that while exercising critique illustrates the affective relation to the colonial past. Critique then becomes a balancing act, performing a denial subverted by affirmation and affective attachment. The following discussion draws from the assumption that art acts as a strategic device in the practice of critique by producing a sort of knowledge that draws directly from sensorial impact, at times without submitting to the bottleneck of signification, to use a term coined by Friedrich Kittler (Kittler, 1999, p. 4).

Widely acclaimed by international film critics at the 2012 Berlinale, where it received the Alfred-Bauer-Preis, Portuguese filmmaker Miguel Gomes' 2011 film *Tabu* is a cinematic *tour de force* acting out the return of

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the repressed memory of empire in Portuguese mainstream public discourse. Paulo de Medeiros has critically pointed out the film rides a nostalgic wave, using an ironic approach to Portugal's imperial trajectory and its past and current geopolitical situation. As an aesthetic assemblage, the film "duplicates, questions and problematizes the relations of power, cultural and political, between North and South, between centre and periphery" (Medeiros, 2015, p. 4). Filmed in black and white, the film performs an illustration of a magic realism of sorts, articulating myth and contemporaneity, dream and nightmare, an attachment to the past and the compromise with the present. The characters are type-cast, embodying a story of cruel seduction without agency, a story where the unlawful love relationship is enmeshed with power politics, where sexual and colonial desire are bound in a deadly embrace.

Take, to start, the characters of Aurora, an old middle-class woman who cannot forget her past life on the foothills of the made-up Mount Tabu, in Africa, and her maid, a black African, a former colonial subject, whose sole occupation is to take care of the old lady.



Fig. 1 - Miguel Gomes, *Tabu* (2011). Aurora and her caretaker.
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The caregiver performs a rather incompetent task, playing out before her mistress a lazy sloppiness that contrasts with the self-discipline with which she learns to read Portuguese by herself. The third border line character is the explorer, António Ventura, the Jimmy-Deanesque seducer, in love with Africa and with love itself.



Fig. 1 - Miguel Gomes, *Tabu* (2011). Ventura and Aurora.
© O Som e a Fúria.

The film is a regressive fantasy, driven by the obsessions of a neurotic character, an elderly woman living in Lisbon but obsessed with a crime that had apparently taken place over 40 years ago on the foothills of Mount Tabu, an imaginary space in the imaginary continent that Africa has always been for the Portuguese. Gomes displays in Aurora the insanity of empire. A compulsive gambler, Aurora — whose name signifies Sunrise — is a borderline character, seeking in the restitution of the past, a fantasy to quell the inability to deal with a profound depression that will ultimately end in death.

But the film is also a meta-reflection on the work of film itself as a producer

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of images, and of imperial images at that. *Tabu* displays a fantasy of exoticism, igniting in the viewer a regression into the history of cinema to Friedrich Murnau's *Tabu* (1931) and its construction of exotic difference in the Pacific.



Fig. 3. Friedrich Murnau, *Tabu* (1931).

The filmic homage to Murnau is even displayed in the name of the main character, Aurora, invoking the Portuguese translation of the German filmmaker's *Sunrise – A Tale of two Humans* (1927). Clearly, *Tabu* is less relevant as a comment on the nature of Portuguese colonialism as on the colonial as a cinematic construct and on cinema's nostalgic production of images, instilling the viewer's return to an imaginary space produced in the mind. Thus, not only is the cinematic narrative constructed as an inverted citation of Murnau, who structures the 1931 film in two parts titled *Paradise* and *Paradise Lost*, respectively, while Gomes' begins with *Paradise Lost* and returns to *Paradise* in the explorer's telling of the African tale, but the shards of the previous film also become a narrative device in the Portuguese film.

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⁷ The discussion on the colonial as the space of desire and perverse satisfaction is a trope of postcolonial theory from Homi Bhabha to Robert Young (1996). For Bhabha, the colonial apparatus works with the devices of irony, mimicry and repetition (Bhabha, 1995, p. 85). This apparatus is a useful tool to instruct an inquiry into the operation of critical nostalgia in Portuguese aesthetic appropriations of the colonial. Repetition is a double bind device that supports coloniality's civilizing mission in repeating a Western model and creating a narrative whereby the natives become "repetitions" (copies) of the white man, which they can never be, while at the same time working critically to deconstruct the strategy it has created. The perverse compulsion to repeat fights the repressed, struggling to emerge. Moreover, it is cruel because it suggests that the repressed that it reenacts can be overcome and hence satisfaction may be attained, even as it cannot.

The unlikely, magical, in fact, dimension of Gomes' *Tabu* has offered up the film both to praise and criticism. For some, the poetical tone of the B/W filming suggests a representation of Africa that is simply the nostalgic return of the imperial imagery, but in fact, the fantasy that overlaps with the previous cinematic fantasy of Otherness goes much deeper as it questions the possibility of knowing in modernity beyond the string of images produced by the reproducible technologies of film and photography. The film hence enacts a radical critique about cinema's ability to appropriate the conditions of the real, just as it uses the medium of film to precisely instruct that same critique.

Tabu is a remarkable tale of compulsion and repetition. This is a tale of perverse seduction, working on three levels: the first one is the love plot—it tells a story of forbidden desire between the colonial Don Giovanni, Ventura — “who loved many women, but felt the continuous lack of satisfaction, which led him to pursue a new one” (Gomes, 2012, 15:17) — and Aurora. It is a story of love leading up to a crime, which haunts the star-crossed lovers throughout their lives. The second level is that of cinematic production — as it comments on film's ability to perversely seduce the viewer into an imaginary pact, what Noël Carrol describes as film's “fictional paradox”, in which the viewer knows that what she sees on the screen is a hoax but chooses to believe in the unlikely possibility of it ever becoming real (Carrol, 2008, p. 153). The viewer is captured in a perverse relation as the cinematic apparatus produces a fantasy sustaining the inclination to return to the site where happiness was both a promise and a delusion. Here the question is no longer about producing “the ocular conviction” early photography so deftly managed to generate suggesting a reality effect that became a device in the production of the colonial, but about illustrating that the present, which is always an emergence, is a mediated effect of cinematic technologies. That the colonial, that is, is not simply a historical product of the past but that it lives on in the repetition enacted by the cinematic apparatus. The cruelty of the cinematic hoax, then, resembles that of the seducer. It is a string of repeated images of desire promising a satisfaction that will not be attained and ultimately lives on in the repeated enunciation of that same ideal in film. Finally, the third level, looks at the colonial as the most extreme production of an apparatus of desire that because of the very nature of desire can never attain satisfaction, while producing an immense displeasure, which derives from the violence and repression inscribed into the bodies of the colonized.⁷

Freud describes the compulsion to repeat in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as a contradictory device, which is simultaneously an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things — a stage in the process

of working through trauma, for instance — but also a device that overrides the pleasure principle (Freud, 1989, p. 605), as the perpetual recurrence cuts across the pleasurable motion that arises from understanding novelty as the condition of enjoyment (p. 611).

Unlike Miguel Gomes', Ivo Ferreira's *Letters from the War* visualize the hiatus of the forlorn extraterritorial desire of the soldier, the disruptive decoupling from the metropolitan home. This is a film about men and masculinity. About a man, in fact, the genial author Lobo Antunes at his most vulnerable moment. This is also a film torn with contradiction, where the black and white photography produces an aesthetic skin beautifying the forlorn conditions of the men stationed deep inside the Angolan territory. But this is also a film where the director questions the letter writer's authorial status, his mastery over the storytelling, and the narrative construction of the woman, who is silenced in the book. In the film, however, Ferreira empowers the feminine voice and by making the "invented" wife of the letters and photographs narrate the story, inverts the lover's appeal, his suffering and longing for the waiting woman at home. As such the film creates a space for the reiteration of desire and provides a visual and auditory space for the woman silenced in the letters. The couple's unfulfilled longing becomes the nodal point of a crisis that is both sexual, social and political and in a certain way the icon of the collective infatuation with a land that is repeatedly not perceived as real by the soldiers and the settlers. This is clearly a colonial perspective and Ferreira's camera does not divert from the colonial gaze. Just as the letters are the most radical performance of subjective singularity, it would be unreal, as an American critic claimed, to provide "more agency" to the Angolans. The interactions of the lovesick doctor with the African communities — such as in the episode in which he briefly "adopts" a child whose parents were killed off in a Rangers aid. the moment of entertainment when the two celebrity singers arrive to entertain the battalion, or the repetition of movie night at the barracks — with the soldiers repeating the lines that they by now know by heart — are formulaic in nature, resembling similar type cast scenes in Vietnam war films. *Letters of War* is in this sense also a film about film, commenting on the war film genre and its conventions, repeating while undoing.

On a different tone, *Nostalgia* (2002) is a video-essay, a playful montage of home movies from the early 1970s in Mozambique, welded with documentary footage, postcards, photos and other family memorabilia. Maria Lusitano takes her family's own nostalgic memories of Africa and displaces them by creating a fictional narrative from the standpoint of a 17-year-old boy who is experiencing

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the last days of empire in Africa. The video narrative combines the critique of Portuguese authoritarianism with an attraction for the freedom of the wide African landscape, the contradictions of the positions of the settlers and of the white officers and their families engaged in the war effort of the government. It also depicts the effacement of the local populations under the aegis of an imperial system. The video acts as a kind of optical unconscious to the work of the Portuguese colonial psyche and harks back to the tropes of the well-known colonial imagery by portraying the landscape and the built nature of empire, by reproducing the life of the settlers and by equating the exoticism of the scenery with the fleeting and supplemental figures of the black workers or locals, who appear like ghosts in the home-film narratives.

These melancholic tropes are inversely appropriated, however, in Lusitano's revisionist approach. Albeit with a certain tragic irony, *Nostalgia* also presents the silences and the gaps in colonial memory. It deals with the latency of war, which never becomes truly visible, but hovers throughout as a ghostly presence read in the visual semiosis of the bodies of the Portuguese or African soldiers recruited into the colonial army.



Figs. 4-7
Nostalgia by Maria Lusitano.

Lusitano cuts up the organicism of imperial identity by exploiting the visual tools of colonial melancholia to expose the gaps, contradictions and aporias of Portuguese coloniality. By slowing down projection and then running it fast-forward, by presenting blurred shots or burning the film, she shows the cuts, gaps and interruptions that subvert the cogency of the video narrative and at the same time undercut the linearity of the national narrative of Africa. Moreover, by placing the projection sound within the filmic diegesis, the video work creates a conscious practice of *Verfremdung* [distancing] and avoids the naturalization of the visible. The fragility of the images displayed in the filmic montage presents the practice of interference in the nostalgic intentionality that supported the initial production of the home movies; and whilst revealing the fragility of private memory in the public management of the past, it also reveals the fragile and constructed nature of public visibility.

In the closing pages of *Camera lucida*, Roland Barthes writes about the dangers of visual recall for memory practices. Precisely because the photograph tends to naturalize the visible and place the referent at the forefront of concerns, “not only is the photograph never a memory, but it blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter-memory” (Barthes, 1980, p. 155). For this reason, Barthes considered that the photograph had no future, it could only be attached to the present and to a past which inevitably constrained the present. Despite his radical views on the violence of the image, Barthes’ concerns are useful to address the links between the melancholia of colonial visibility and its post-modern revisions. Visibility is indeed cut across by power because images instil optical regimes that wreak violence upon the individual perception of both the present and the past. Nonetheless, its “essencing” dimension, its ability to create a simulacrum of the real “as it is”, may be inversely appropriated by the same image technology. In the case of the contradictory conditions of visual recall in contemporary Portuguese society, video artists like Maria Lusitano Santos draw on the melancholia of colonial visibility to deconstruct its organic simulacrum and use montage, appropriation, morphing and pastiche as visual strategies to recode the relation to the past with a critical intent. They thus assume the inevitable falsification of visual materials as productive in the articulation of gaps in public visibility. This process allows them to present memory as a heteroglossic act, as a fragile strategy, as a complex process that may not evade a certain nostalgic longing while being recoded in a reflexive and critical fashion.

The compulsion to repeat that these works inevitably convey are hopelessly entangled in the cruel optimism referred to earlier, namely by

suggesting the possibility that maybe “this time around” — within the economy of the cinematic space — the site of discontent can be mended, only once more to relapse into frustration and return to the cycle of desire from which there is no escape. And it is this accepted and consciously known though rhetorically unspoken process that both Miguel Gomes’ *Tabu* and Ivo Ferreira’s *Letters* so skilfully illustrate, denouncing the attachment to a past, whose violence lies beyond the possibilities of the work of representation, but that lives on in the visual repetition of filmic imagination.

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