

REVOLUTION &

CINEMA



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REVOLUTION & CINEMA

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.CONTENTS

.04

INTRODUCTION

Daniel Ribas
& Nuno Crespo

.07

**CINEMA
CAN MAKE A
CHANGE IN THE
WORLD**

A Conversation
Between Ros
Gray and June
Givanni

Ros Gray
& June Givanni

.29

**MARCELA
CANTUÁRIA
AND LATIN
AMERICAN
CINEMA:**

Painting and
Documentary
from an Anti-
Hegemonic
Perspective

Aldones Silva

.44

A RIP IN TIME:

Crime
and Poetry
In *Malunginho*

Eduardo Prado
Cardoso

.56

**OF
CROCODILES
AND LOVE
LETTERS**

Colonial Memories
in Portuguese
Film

Isabel Capeloa Gil

.73

**THE
STRANGENESS
OF WHAT WE
ARE:**

Fiona Tan's
Facing Forward

João Oliveira Duarte

.83

**BETWEEN
MARXISM AND
POSTMODERNISM:**

'Cultural Revolution'
and the Sino-
Soviet Split as
Entertainment in
Jean-Luc Godard's
La Chinoise (1967)

Matthew Mason

.99

**COLONIALISM,
HISTORY AND
MEMORY IN
ADWA:**

*An African Victory
and Blood is Not
Fresh Water*

Riccardo Uras

INTRO- DUCTION

In the Spring of 2020, the School of Arts at the Universidade Católica Portuguesa and CITAR (Research Centre for Science and Technology of the Arts) organised a seminar – that has taken place every year since 2019 – dedicated to the theme that is the title of this book: *Revolution & Cinema*. The intention was to gather a handful of researchers to discuss how cinema and the visual arts were and are at the forefront of representing the “revolution”. We started from the statement that the fields of cinema and contemporary visual arts have been positioned in recent years from the perspective of recovering a historical memory of colonised peoples. The change of viewpoints came either from the images produced in contemporaneity or by the recovery of films produced by native filmmakers and artists retrieved from archives, allowing the uncovering of their imaginary, built after the revolutions and the departure of the colonisers.

The academy itself has produced a series of books and texts that aim to document and consider these archives, as well as these national cinemas and artistic objects, giving them a place of visibility and contradicting established canons of cinema and its Western worldview. As an example, the conference also included the launch of Professor Ros Gray’s *Cinemas of the Mozambican Revolution*, which traces a history of the INC (Mozambican film institute) and the cinema made by Mozambican militant filmmakers. As in the seminar, which this book seeks to complement and deepen, the texts below engage with the discussion of this uncovering, either from this silenced history of a national cinema and/or art of colonised peoples, or from Western artists and filmmakers who work on this legacy from a postcolonial perspective.

This volume opens with an engaging conversation between Ros Gray,

INTRO
DUCTION

specialist in militant filmmaking, particularly in relation to liberation struggles and revolutionary movements in Mozambique, Angola, Guinea-Bissau and Burkina Faso, and June Givanni, film curator, archivist, international consultant around Pan-African cinema and founding director of the June Givanni Pan-African Cinema Archive (JGPACA). This conversation picked up from the contribution of both researchers as keynote speakers of the seminar, to explore the confluences and intersections of Gray's and Givanni's research practices regarding "anticolonial and militant filmmaking from the mid-twentieth century through to the present day".

After this conversation, the book presents five articles from participants in the seminar. In the first, Aldones Silva engages with some works by contemporary Brazilian painter Marcela Cantuária, while also addressing the role of Latin American cine-documentary and art in general for an emancipation of the imaginary. Counterpoint readings, critical positionings, changes of social context are issues that should be considered inside the symbolic universe of the arts, while questioning the colonial processes of artistic and cultural interpretation that enabled the emergence of certain narratives and iconographies.

The book follows with Eduardo Prado Cardoso and his reading of the film *Malunguinho* (2013), directed by Felipe Peres Calheiros. This short film refers to the assassination of Malunguinho, the black leader of Catuca's quilombo, in 1835. According to the author, this work challenges the privilege of the written word and certain narratives instilled in official archives, while transporting the continuous, real and symbolic importance of Malunguinho's struggle to present-day Brazil. Cardoso proposes that Calheiros' film deepens the relationship with Brazilian history by "documenting cultural practices known to be at risk" and by "making its own audiovisual expression a critical and sensorial counterpart to hard facts".

From the same timeframe, Isabel Capeloa Gil writes about *Tabu* (2012), the cinephile wonder by Miguel Gomes, Ivo Ferreira's *Letters from War* (2016), and *Nostalgia* (2002), by Maria Lusitano. Drawing in notions about the Portuguese colonialism, Gil proposes the concept of ectoplasm of empire to discuss how contemporary Portuguese cinema questions the imaginary and the lessons of history that go underneath.

João Oliveira Duarte analyses the work from 1999 *Facing Forward* by artist Fiona Tan. This piece brings together archival footage from different places with passages from Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. Duarte reflects not only on the artist's ability to challenge a certain reification of gazes, bodies and

INTRO
DUCTION

past in the fields of the ethnographic and the anthropologic, but also proposes that, apart from the finding of a past in the present and future, or the recurring images of memory, *Facing Forward* and Fiona Tan, both in the condition of migrant and artist, might address the idea that one is excluded from the past. A certain disorder of identity where the interplay and rearranging of images is the only way, since “there is no narrative that could be able to restore the true image of the past”.

With a more historical approach, Matthew Mason writes about of Jean-Luc Godard’s *La Chinoise* and the way it encapsulates some tensions in the West concerning politics, capitalism, and revolution in the 1960s. The author argues that the film is caught “between Marxism and Postmodernism” and that elements of colour, *décor*, *mise-en-scène* both reflect the renewal of western hopes for revolution, relating with Mao’s “cultural revolution”, while at the same time connecting with consumer society and with a Pop Art aesthetics.

Finally, Riccardo Uras analyses two Ethiopian documentary films: *Adwa: An African Victory* (1999) by Haile Gerima, and *Blood Is Not Fresh Water* (1997) by Theo Eshetu. These works, in his view, contribute to attenuating an absence of debate on Italy’s colonial past, and to the deconstruction of myths regarding a “colonialism with a human face” and the “good will” of Italians towards Ethiopia’s process of colonisation. The views expressed by these two directors on Ethiopian history are good examples of attempts to build an African counter-history, “questioning mainstream historiography which often looks at the African world from a Eurocentric and exotic lens”.

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CINEMA CAN MAKE A CHANGE IN THE WORLD

A Conversation Between
Ros Gray and **June Givanni**

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**CINEMA
CAN MAKE
A CHANGE
IN THE
WORLD**

A Conversation Between
Ros Gray and June Givanni

Ros Gray – This conversation picks up from the conference *Cinema & Revolution* in 2020 that we both participated in. We wanted to explore further the confluences and intersections of our research practices, which are concerned with anticolonial and militant filmmaking from the mid-twentieth century through to the present day, particularly in relation to anticolonial struggle and decolonisation and Pan-Africanism. June, to start us off, would you like to say a bit about the Pan-African Film Archive that you have built up over many years?

June Givanni – I've been a film curator and programmer for 40 years, programming primarily around Pan-African cinema, cinema of the African continent, and the filmmaking of the worldwide African diaspora. I've worked mainly independently and with various institutions, such as the BFI and Toronto International Film Festival, Images Caraïbes, and with many festivals in Africa, Europe, Asia and the Americas. I've also worked with universities in recent years. Pan-African cinema and Third Cinema have been a major focus of my work. In fact, Third Cinema was my first area of connection within the industry. I've been curating from the UK, where I'm based, around decolonisation, Third Cinema, and also around the narratives of Pan-African cinema. I set up the Pan-African Cinema Archive based on many years of programming such cinema because in that pre-digital era programmers and curators were given and collected material for our curatorial practice. Everything was very physical, so I ended up after all of those years with an archive of films that are mainly on VHS, but also a lot of paper material, documentation, photographic materials, some audio as well. And, of course, a lot of artistic materials – all around Pan-African cinema. It came to a point where it made sense to share this with other curators and with people interested in studying African cinema, those interested in the artistic dimensions and, of course, with the filmmakers themselves. There is a lot of information in the Archive about the filmmakers and the contexts in which they were making films, and also about the development of African cinema over various decades during which the industry has been connecting across the world. The Pan-African Cinema Archive is an independent archive that provides witness to this development in cinema. I had the opportunity to become more engaged in Third Cinema through Third Eye: London's Festival of Third World Cinema. Third Eye brought together filmmakers from five continents, including a Cuban delegation with the writer José Massip and Chilean Miguel Littín, one of the architects of Third Cinema; the distinguished Indian filmmakers Shyam Benegal and Prema Karanth, the female director of the opening Indian film *Phaniyamma* (1983); it was a moment in the 1980s when black British

**CINEMA
CAN MAKE
A CHANGE
IN THE
WORLD**

A Conversation Between
Ros Gray and June Givanni

¹ One of Haile Gerima's seminal Ethiopian films is *Mirt Sost Shi Amit* (1975).

² LA Rebellion filmmakers of UCLA in the 1960s and 1970s, including Charles Burnett, Julie Dash, Larry Clark, Billy Woodberry, Alile Sharon Larkin, and others.

³ The Pan-African Federation of Filmmakers (FEPACI) was established in Tunisia in 1969 and was inaugurated in 1970. The Pan-African Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou (FESPACO) is the largest most significant festival on the continent and was first held in Burkina Faso in 1969. Recent publications produced by Black Camera and FESPACO on the occasion of the festival's 50 Anniversary are *African Cinema: Manifesto & Practice for Cultural Decolonization. Part I FESPAÇO: Formation, Evolution Challenges (2021)* and *African Cinema: Manifesto & Practice For Cultural Decolonization. Part III. The Documentary Record: Statements, Declarations, Resolutions, Manifestos* (2021).

<https://mediaschool.indiana.edu/news-events/news/item.html?n=black-camera-publishes-first-collaborative-issue-with-fespaco>
<https://mediaschool.indiana.edu/news-events/news/item.html?n=black-camera-publishes-3rd-collaborative-issue-with-fespaco-concluding-2-year-initiative>

filmmakers were also seeking to decolonise their cinematic and artistic practice with aesthetic forms and narratives defining non-dominant identities. There are also the African American filmmakers and scholars Bill Gunn (*Ganja & Hess*), Clyde Taylor and Monona Wali and Haile Gerima. Gerima is an ardent advocate of both Third and Pan-African cinema whose work and activism in cinema straddles cinema of the African Continent as an Ethiopian Filmmaker¹ and the North American African diaspora, in which context he was renowned as one of the LA Rebellion filmmakers². So, alongside Haile, the African filmmaker contingent included Kwaw Ansah from Ghana (*Love Brewed in the African Pot*), Gaston Kabore (*Wend Kuuni*) of Burkina Faso, and Ferid Boughedir (*Camera D'Afrique*), and of course South African Lionel Ngakane (*Jemima and Johnny; and Vokani Awake*), to name a few.

It was very much a moment where we were aware that Third Cinema signalled a clear context for the revolutionary role of cinema and the role of festivals as key sites beyond regular cinema going. It was an opportunity to expose audiences to a range of cinemas that could expand and nurture their tastes in film. We were aware that cinema's potential beyond the world of entertainment was politically significant and that festivals could actually present cultural products in these ways. Some of the filmmakers who attended from Africa, from the Indian subcontinent, from Latin America, African Americans, Black British, and obviously other parts of Europe were already engaged; especially regarding the African continent through FEPACI (the Pan-African Filmmakers Federation) with the development of cinema structures on the African continent, and a few of them were involved with the development of FESPACO in Burkina Faso, a major strategic film festival significant in the development of African cinema on the continent³. A number of filmmakers involved in these organisations were present at Third Eye, including those mentioned above, all spoke ardently about the significance of the development of those key institutions for cinema on the continent. A younger generation of black British filmmakers and curators also participated, including Imruh Bakari, Henry Martin, John Akomfrah, Martina Attille, Maureen Blackwood, H. O. Nazareth, Karen Alexander, Pervaiz Khan, and many others, and the festival discussion was also followed a year later with a conference on Black British Cinema held at the National Film Theatre. The following year, 1994, the Unit combined both discussions into the publication *Third Eye: Struggles for Black and Third World Cinema*. It was a key moment of building on the work of African cinema, of Black Cinema that others had been working on, such as Jim Pines, an African American scholar and programmer based at the BFI since the late

**CINEMA
CAN MAKE
A CHANGE
IN THE
WORLD**

A Conversation Between
Ros Gray and June Givanni

⁴ Pines, J. & Willeman, P. (Eds) (1990). *Questions of Third Cinema*. British Film Institute.

⁵ Gray, R. (2007). *Ambitions of Cinema: Revolution, Event, Screen*. PhD Thesis. Goldsmiths, University of London.

1970s, who also worked at the Commonwealth Institute in London, and who had staged the Ghana Film Week and the Nigeria Film Week there. He also staged the Festival of Black Cinema with co-festival organiser Parminder Vir, in 1982, linking the development of black filmmakers in the UK and the USA. Vir subsequently went on to set up the Third Eye Film Festival from her base at the Greater London Council, in 1983. In the late 1980s, Pines and another BFI colleague, Paul Willeman, expanded the focus on Third Cinema with a major conference as part of the Edinburgh Film Festival and they co-wrote the book *Questions of Third Cinema*⁴.

Over the years, I've also worked with film festivals in North America, the Caribbean and beyond, but such festivals and conferences as Third Eye in London and the Third Cinema Conference in Edinburgh were important opportunities to link with, discuss and explore strategies for revolutionary filmmaking that could expand the creativity of the cinematic arts and foster international collaboration. In later years, Africa and the History of Cinematic Ideas Conference (1995), organised by the African Caribbean Unit of the BFI, as part of its Pan-Institute Africa '95 twelve-part programme, was significant in taking that agenda forward, and the book I edited from that conference, with an introduction by Imruh Bakari, and which included Sylvia Wynter's Conference Keynote, was *Symbolic Narratives: African Cinema* (BFI, 2001).

Ros Gray – That was how I first came across your work, June, when I was working on my PhD. My background as a film scholar is in researching militant filmmaking and anticolonial filmmaking in situations of radical change. I was particularly fascinated, when I was writing my PhD, in how the cinema screen was a site of gathering, a site of transformation, of consciousness-raising, of education and dissemination of ideas⁵. I was really interested in what had happened in Mozambique in terms of FRELIMO's use of filmmaking during the armed struggle and, after independence, the foundation of the Instituto Nacional de Cinema. But for my PhD I also wrote about other contexts, such as Angola, Guinea-Bissau and Burkina Faso, the latter particularly in relation to FESPACO and the cine-politics of Thomas Sankara. I was very interested in the role of film festivals and in when they have been important gatherings bringing together filmmakers, film producers, people from industry and so on to really think about the role that cinema could play in terms of social change and decolonisation. It was in the process of that PhD research that I became aware of your work, June, and of certain key events and festivals that brought people together and allowed for an exchange of ideas. It was during the writing of my

**CINEMA
CAN MAKE
A CHANGE
IN THE
WORLD**

A Conversation Between
Ros Gray and June Givanni

⁶ Eshun, K. & Gray, R. (2011). The Militant Image: A Ciné-Geography. In *Third Text. Special Issue*, 108, Volume 25, Issue 1.

⁷ For a detailed account, see Gray, R. (2020). Chapter 1 - We Will Win! Filming the Armed Struggle in Mozambique, 1968–1973. In *Cinemas of the Mozambican Revolution: Anti-Colonialism, Independence and Internationalism in Filmmaking, 1968-1991* (pp.15-64). Boydell & Brewer.

PhD that I first started using the term “ciné-geography” as a way of describing the connections made through filmmaking, through films, and by filmmakers in pursuit of radical politics. Later, Kodwo Eshun and I developed this further for a special issue of *Third Text* titled *The Militant Image: A Ciné-Geography*⁶. I wasn’t interested much in specific geographies *per se*, or specific nationalisms, but rather in the way that filmmaking could have this agency and this capacity to change perceptions, to create new historical narratives and so on. That led me to become very interested in what happened in Mozambique and that became a key focus of my research. FRELIMO, the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique, that led the armed struggle against colonialism in Mozambique and formed a government after independence in 1975, recognised quite early on the power of filmmaking and photography to communicate with the outside world. They didn’t have much capacity to make films in the early years of the armed struggle themselves, so they invited filmmakers from around the world, filmmakers from Europe such as Lennart Malmer from Sweden and Margaret Dickinson from Britain, the African American civil rights lawyer Robert van Lierop from the United States, who made the film *A Luta Continua*, among many others from China, the Soviet Union and elsewhere⁷.



Fig. 1 - Still From
Terra Sonâmbula
(2007) by Teresa
Prata.
© Caroline Alder.

**CINEMA
CAN MAKE
A CHANGE
IN THE
WORLD**

A Conversation Between
Ros Gray and June Givanni

⁸ A more recent film on one of those Caribbean advocates – Ulrich Cross – chronicles the link between the continents and the participation of the Caribbean in that Independence agenda. The film, *Hero*, is directed by Frances-Anne Solomon, 2018.

June – In that period of the late 1960s and early 1970s there had been a major meeting between Latin American and African filmmakers in Algeria in 1969 – the First Pan-African Cultural Festival of Algiers. That major meeting between two continents and screening event was a first significant encounter of filmmakers from the two continents in the 1960s. Obviously it was a time when the African continent was moving decisively towards independence. The independence movements were taking place, and in relation to what was happening across the continent, governments were making clear statements and many diaspora architects of the African independence movements such as CLR James and George Padmore, and other Caribbean activists and intellectuals were actively involved in shaping its success⁸. There were statements I think in the early 1970s coming out of the African Union, or the Organisation of African Unity (OAU)...

Ros Gray – That was quite an important distinctive feature of that moment, when the nation state was recognised as having the potential to, in a way, be a frame for decolonising the film industry. There was a sense of possibility that the dominance of certain economic models could be transformed and that the neocolonialism that persisted, in terms of the global networks of cinema, could be challenged through nationalising the film industry, but also through building on international solidarity and collaboration between independent states. It was important that people like Simon Hartog, who was involved in film and television

**CINEMA
CAN MAKE
A CHANGE
IN THE
WORLD**

A Conversation Between
Ros Gray and June Givanni

⁹Cf. Gray, 2020, pp.
119-120.

trade union activism in the UK and later worked for the INC in Mozambique, was present for some of those discussions, in his case the Meeting of Third World Filmmakers in Algiers in 1973⁹. The discussions that took place were an important example of thinking about what could be, how a decolonised cinema industry might be actualised.

June Givani – Definitely, the Algerian charter of '75 was something that the Pan-African Filmmakers Federation had put forward in their Congress of 1975. But that had followed an Article – Article 22 I think it was – where the OAU had called on African countries to actively evolve and engage their cultural products as part of the continent's move towards independence. That was something that had been encouraged at that level. There has always been this connection on the continent between the OAU and the individual governments and individual organisations that were pushing for a revolutionary and a decolonising role for cinema.

Ros Gray – And Algeria was important at that moment because they also recognised the liberation movements in what would soon be former Portuguese colonies as the representatives of their countries. FRELIMO, PAIGC and MPLA were present and represented at the Pan-African Cultural Festival of Algiers (1969), for instance, and so on. They were part of this international dialogue as representatives of the nations that would come into being after independence.

June Givani – I think we should also remember, of course, that this was within the Cold War era, so there was a lot of connection between not only Latin America, in terms of cinema, but also Russia and Cuba and the socialist countries that were coming to the aid of the independence and revolutionary movements on the African continent. Alliances were being formed right across these continents and revolutionary movements on the African continent benefited from significant Cuban support. So it was not surprising that at the time when the African continent was looking at having a decolonising role for cinema and for cultural product that there might be also a connection between the cinemas on those two continents. And that also began to develop, as I mentioned, in the late 1960s. It was quite important.

Ros Gray – The forms that support took were important too, as it was enabling an independent future for filmmaking in newly independent nations – aesthetic influences were there, but also material support in terms of equipment and

**CINEMA
CAN MAKE
A CHANGE
IN THE
WORLD**

A Conversation Between
Ros Gray and June Givani

¹⁰On the work of Cuban filmmakers in Angola after independence, see Gray, R. (2017), *Clear Lines on an Internationalist Map: Foreign Filmmakers in Angola at Independence*. In M.C. Piçarra & T. Castro (eds), *(Re)imagining African Independence: Film, Visual Arts and the Fall of the Portuguese Empire* (Oxford: Peter Lang); on the work of Santiago Álvarez and other Cuban filmmakers in Mozambique, see Gray, R. (2020), *Birth (of the Image) of a Nation: Delivering Cinema to the People, 1976-1978*. In *Cinemas of the Mozambican Revolution Anti-Colonialism, Independence and Internationalism in Filmmaking, 1968-1991* (pp. 113-148). Boydell & Brewer.

training for filmmakers as well. Numerous African filmmakers trained in the Soviet Union and in Cuba, and that was seen as a very important part of building a future national film industry.

June Givani – Yes, Ousmane Sembène, Souleymane Cissé, Sarah Maldoror, who all studied filmmaking in the Soviet Union, Flora Gomes, who studied in Cuba, and later filmmakers like Abderrahmane Sissako, who studied in Moscow from 1983 to 1989. It was an alternative to the training opportunities that came out of the colonial relationships that the continent had had with Europe. And so, it was an opportunity for looking towards a different approach. A slightly more independent approach, which I suppose could be discussed, for the continent and its filmmakers to develop their own cinema. A revolutionary cinema with its own agenda, the sort of cinema that the revolutionary leader of Burkina Faso in the early 1980s, Thomas Sankara, envisaged as a crucial element in the decolonisation of minds that would be necessary for self-determined futures for the people of the continent.

Ros Gray – Yes, and of course as well as Flora Gomes, Sana Na N'Hada and other filmmakers from Guinea Bissau trained in Cuba. I was also thinking about the importance of Cuba in terms of its support for Angola. From the Cuban side it became very important to make films in Africa as well. By the mid-1970s, when they were giving a lot of military support to MPLA, filmmakers like Santiago Álvarez made numerous trips to Angola and to Mozambique to make films that in a way were making a claim for the connection between Cuba and Africa, a justification for the forms of solidarity that Cuba gave to the MPLA and FRELIMO and other struggles¹⁰.

June Givani – The history of Cuban support for the MPLA is very elegantly set out in Jihan El-Tahri's film *Cuba, an African Odyssey* (2007), which has two parts of course: the second part being the part that focuses on Angola and the Angolan revolution. But it's very much based on a lot of the archive footage from ICAIC, the Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos, where she spent a number of years sifting through their archive. It's witnessed in films like that and others. And there was another comprehensive archive-based film *Independência* (2015) by Fradique that also covers that crucial period of Angola's struggle for independence. Another really quite strong film that also witnesses some of this history beyond the archival films approach about the Angolan revolutionary struggle is one of the powerful classics of African cinema:

**CINEMA
CAN MAKE
A CHANGE
IN THE
WORLD**

A Conversation Between
Ros Gray and June Givanni

¹¹Gray, R. (2012).
Haven't You Heard of
Internationalism? – The
Socialist Friendships of
Mozambican Cinema.
In Lars Kristensen (ed.),
*Postcommunist Film:
Russia, Europe and
the World* (pp. 53–74).
Routledge.

¹²Nash, M. (2016).
*Red Africa: Affective
Communities and the Cold
War*. Black Dog Publishing.

the dramatic feature *Sambizanga* (1972), by Sara Maldoror, who brings her uniquely direct experience of the revolutionary struggle in her background to the film. Another important and rarely seen film in this connection is from Abderrahmane Sissako. He made a film some years after leaving Russia, about his trip to Angola in search of an old friend, the Angolan classmate who was also studying there at the time. *Rostov Luanda* (2007) was based on that connection. The trip turns into a journey of discovery about the Angolan revolution and its aftermath. They are all films which also demonstrate the roles of and the significant cost to women as combatants in the Angolan anticolonial struggle.

Ros Gray – One of the things that really moved me about that film is the way in which it's also about how revolutionary moments of turmoil are experienced in terms of personal relationships and everyday life. It seems to me that there's a question at the end of the film about what happens to those relationships afterwards. He eventually tracks down his friend, but you don't see the actual meeting. It's left suspended. And there's also the film he made as a student, *October*.

June Givani – *October* is a beautiful film with – if you get the right copy – a surprising and special moment to watch out for.

Ros Gray – It is indeed a beautiful film about an African student who has a relationship with a Russian woman. There's a scene where the protagonist is outside in the snow and you see an image of a child, and I've always felt that that moment in the film is really interesting in terms of the temporality of that image: it gestures both to the past of Africans in Russia, but also to a future because the girlfriend is pregnant and it's not clear what's going to happen, whether he's going to stay there or not¹¹. They're both really beautiful, personal films.

June Givani – Really beautiful, really personal and political, and very powerful films. We've tended to show them together. I did some work around the screenings that were held around revolutionary cinema for the Calvert22 series 'Red Africa', which you also were involved with, which was curated by Mark Nash¹². I introduced both *Rostov Luanda and October* and spoke about the work of Abderrahmane Sissako.

**CINEMA
CAN MAKE
A CHANGE
IN THE
WORLD**

A Conversation Between
Ros Gray and June Givanni

Ros Gray – Both those works are in quite a different register to a lot of the films about African revolution, which often had quite a different agenda that was about information and tended to be quite didactic as well. I am thinking about how, at the time of independence, there was very much an emphasis on documentary, in terms of filmmaking that was taking place in various parts of the African continent. Certainly, in Mozambique there was a strong emphasis on documentary and on information films. Though within that broad frame there was a huge variety in terms of different approaches and influences.

June – Definitely. What I think is quite interesting is how Mozambique later developed quite a specific approach to its dramatic filmmaking. Because magical realism was in the dramatic films – social realism, but also magical realism – and that is something that is quite wonderful. I haven't tracked the development as well as you might have, or can see what that trajectory might have been or why: but the fact is that in Mozambique there is this really powerful and interesting way of storytelling in cinema. Teresa Prata's *Terra Sonâmbula* is a film made in Mozambique described as magical realism cinema.

In terms of its aesthetics and artistic presentation of dramatic narratives, it has a particular approach that is worth exploring and connecting to that national and revolutionary cinema tradition of Mozambique. However, it is the Brazilian/Mozambique 'Cine Novo' filmmaker Ruy Guerra's *Eréndira* (based on renowned magical realism writer Garcia Márquez' novel of the same name and discussed in the context of magical realism cinema) which is said to most closely link Mozambique cinema to Third Cinema – two cinema traditions linked in their revolutionary purpose. The tradition is catching in Southern Africa, where Angolan filmmaker Fradique's 2020 film *Air Conditioner* is one of the most recent uses of this genre to comment on Angolan society today.



Fig. 2 - Still From
Ar Condicionado
(2020) by Fradique.
© Rui Magalhães
(Cafuxi).

**CINEMA
CAN MAKE
A CHANGE
IN THE
WORLD**

A Conversation Between
Ros Gray and June Giovanni

¹³ Cf. Gray, 2020, pp.113-148.

Ros Gray – There was a very strong emphasis on everyday life and on the testimony of people’s experience. You see that in the first edition of *Kuxa Kanema*, the newsreel made by the National Institute of Cinema (INC). *Kuxa Kanema* means “the birth of cinema” and it was the national newsreel that was first made in 1978. Initially those episodes were really quite long, 30 or 40 minutes, and they were very beautifully put together, skilfully shot by extremely talented and experienced cinematographers, and beautifully scripted by very talented writers as well. In a way, one of their roles was to document the changes which were taking place in different parts of the country. As well as trying to create a sense of national unity and informing people about the changes taking place in different parts of the country, they were educating people about how to participate in the unfolding revolution, as it were, through participation in grassroots elections or understanding about the logistics of food delivery and infrastructure¹³. They were very beautifully put together and beautifully shot. And there were some beautiful documentaries made about culture. *Canta Meu Irmão, Ajuda-Me a Cantar* directed by José Cardoso is a very beautiful documentary made in 1981 on the occasion of a national festival of music and dance. The Ministry of Culture had actually invited in a Portuguese filmmaker, José Fonseca e Costa, to make a very big budget documentary that was more of a conventional music documentary focused on the spectacle. But the INC’s documentary *Canta Meu Irmão* is about going to the villages of the musicians and dancers taking part in the festival and really trying to understand the music and dance from a grassroots perspective, and its role in the armed struggle. *Canta Meu Irmão* showed how those dances and songs had been dynamically transformed. For instance, the lyrics might have been rewritten to celebrate the revolution. Culture was not understood as this static artifact, but rather as something which was evolving with the times¹⁴.

**CINEMA
CAN MAKE
A CHANGE
IN THE
WORLD**

A Conversation Between
Ros Gray and June Givanni

¹⁴Cf. Gray, 2020, pp.181-
210.

June Givani – Exactly. There’s a big difference between a lot of colonial, anthropological approaches to film and its use, and even how it was taught and presented in the Anglophone countries around the colonial film units. The understanding of what film was for and how it might be approached was very different. It was a very anthropological approach in those early days. Whereas the Cuban connection or the Russian connection, or the Latin American connection primarily, came with a revolutionary approach that encouraged a different valuing of your culture and who you are, through your cinema, its aesthetics and language, your identity is defined and shaped for a different purpose and value. I think that is definitely something that was very evident and obviously very useful at a time when countries were struggling for their independence.

Ros Gray – I mentioned the name of that film *Canta Meu Irmão, Ajuda-me a Cantar*, which translates as *Sing Brother, Teach Me to Sing*, because even in the title there’s an idea of exchange or a reciprocity. There’s an idea of an exchange taking place between brothers – the brothers of the title. There’s a different set of relationships from the colonial idea of capturing a culture and fixing it somehow. I think that’s a really interesting feature. It is one that is deeply embedded in FRELIMO’s experience of the armed struggle; the idea of the peasant cultures being a driving force, which was very much influenced by Maoism as well. When FRELIMO were based in Tanzania, they had Chinese advisors as well as assistance from the Soviet Union and they were influenced by Julius Nyerere, the President of Tanzania. So that idea of reciprocity between people with technical skills in filmmaking and musicians adapting their traditions to the current revolutionary moment, for me, is quite encapsulated in the title of that film.

Thinking about your work in film programming, June, and the film festivals you are involved with, another really interesting resonance we could discuss is what happened in Mozambique in terms of the efforts there were to, in a way, cultivate and nurture film audiences. One of the things that impressed me with the INC during my research was the effort put into programming seasons of films from different parts of the world and the educational booklets that were produced as well. They are really beautifully written, written in a very lucid and clear way – full of information. There is a real sense that the INC had a pedagogical responsibility to cultivate film audiences and educate people about the films that they were seeing, but also that the films themselves were bringing the world to Mozambique and that the films made in Mozambique were

**CINEMA
CAN MAKE
A CHANGE
IN THE
WORLD**

A Conversation Between
Ros Gray and June Givanni

¹⁵ Cf. Gray, 2020, pp.165-171.

¹⁶ Espinosa, J.G (1979). For an Imperfect Cinema. In J. Burton (Trans.), *Jump Cut*, 20, pp. 24-26.

¹⁷ In one of the panel conversations at the Négritude discussion seminar held at Birkbeck as part of the "Movements" programme (2014), presenting and showcasing the June Givanni Pan-African Cinema Archive (JGPACA), this point was eloquently discussed between Reece Auguiste, Sonia Boyce, John Akomfrah, and chair Laura Mulvey. Here Reece speaks of the "Re-narrativisation of history"; and John of "Spectral Messianicity". A discussion that is useful to understand the re-working and reclaiming of meaning in archival matter. JGPACA will re-present and re-activate this discussion in the not-too-distant future.

bringing Mozambique to the world. I think that's also apparent within some of the films. Some of the films, such as *Estas São As Armas* (1978), directed by Murillo Salles, achieves a kind of cinematic pedagogy through the voiceover's commentary over the montage of images – they're also teaching the viewer how to make a new reading of history, perhaps against the grain of colonial images¹⁵. Because the INC inherited – or rather seized – the colonial film production houses that were left by the Portuguese who left the country after independence, they had the colonial archive images at their disposal and used them to make new films. There was this approach, which you could connect to the Cuban idea of Julio Espinosa, "the imperfect cinema", of making use of materials that were available to you in the revolutionary situation¹⁶. The INC repeatedly used footage from both the anticolonial films that were made by foreign filmmakers during the armed struggle, but also from the colonial archive, and reworked them into new films that pointed out colonial injustices and tried to explain the aggression that they were experiencing from first Rhodesia and then South Africa in terms of a longer colonial history of that region of southern Africa.

June Givani – Yes, that definitely is a key thread within the development of cinema on the continent and it's something that we are looking at in different ways and at different times at the moment. It's a thread within our archive also, and we've found materials – not only from the past, but there are a number of young filmmakers now in the UK who are working with colonial archive material, decolonising, reworking it, reusing it in different ways. One of those young filmmakers is Onyeka Igwe, who takes colonial archives of Africa, particularly Nigeria, but mainly west Africa, and gives the material a whole different meaning and the subjects within them a voice, gives them agency to redefine the reality that they might be in, so that their voices might be heard quite differently to how they were framed within the colonial presentation¹⁷. A different narrative. I think those are really important and interesting. That an approach from that time can be seen coming through the development of Pan-African cinema on the continent, leading to filmmakers that can actually track that back and challenge it now in the same way. It is significant that there are these threads back through cinema across the continent that do that. A lot of it is connected to the idea of this Pan-African history. I mentioned some of these connections with the Caribbean, which were key events and key moments when the strategic Pan African dialogue and experience was connecting and leading towards Independence – the connections between the Independence movements. They

**CINEMA
CAN MAKE
A CHANGE
IN THE
WORLD**

A Conversation Between
Ros Gray and June Givanni

¹⁸ The film made by African American filmmaker William Greaves, *The First World Festival of Negro Arts* (1966), captures this occasion.

were not the first of course: in the 1930s there were writers and key thinkers and cultural and political figures like Aimé Césaire from Martinique, who was in Paris during the time of the Harlem Renaissance, as well as other actors, writers and theorists who were there. All of them with a different challenging approach to black culture, African culture, Pan-African culture. Following on from those years of his study in Paris, Césaire was a key connection with Léopold Senghor, with whom they had developed, with Léon-Gontran Damas, from Guyana, the whole Négritude movement. The Négritude movement was quite important in providing this basis for connections between countries and continents in this struggle for independence, self-knowledge, and self-determination. So, when Senghor held the very first of the Pan-African festivals of Negro Arts in Senegal in 1966, this was when you had key figures like Langston Hughes and others from the Harlem Renaissance era from the US attending¹⁸. It was also the year that Ousmane Sembène had just completed his seminal feature film, *La Noire de...* (1966), which won that year. The whole connection of the continent around this idea of a cultural struggle was very much heightened. This was in '66. So, it was not surprising that the agendas around Pan-Africanism were heightened at that time. It was an important agenda for many of us from the diaspora countries as well as the continent.

One of the things that we do a lot with the archive is work through timelines, because the archive provides a basis for a context in which certain events and developments took place. You can map onto it various other political and cultural developments. I think that is one of the important things that the archive is for and it should be shared in that way: so that researchers, students, filmmakers – filmmakers especially – and artists have access to this material, that it can actually provide a basis for a lot of the work they want to do.

Ros Gray – Can I ask, you mentioned that a lot of your archive is on VHS and takes the form of paper documentation, artworks and so on, and I wonder what the prospects are for digitalisation?

June Givani – It's a constant struggle. The archive mainly exists by working with different partners. Often with academic partners because we don't have enough finance for our independent existence as yet, but we work developing joint projects to raise bits of money to do things. That's how we've been operating so far. But we've also been discussing partnerships for digitisation. We would like to have some control within this, and we are looking to see how we might enter into partnerships with other institutions that can actually be involved in

**CINEMA
CAN MAKE
A CHANGE
IN THE
WORLD**A Conversation Between
Ros Gray and June Givanni

this in some way or to attract philanthropical support and investment to help improve research access to these resources. Those constant discussions are ongoing. Of course, other organisations are interested in housing the archive and have requested it, but we have to be careful that it wouldn't be going into an institution where the catalogue structure might lead to a recolonised approach to presenting the materials. It can be reconfigured of course for wider use, especially in an academic sense, but the restructuring of its Pan-African cinema archive identity would be a compromise too far. It needs to remain as such. Digitisation is a necessity to make the collection more widely available and the recent pandemic has signalled even more the importance of that for its accessibility. Having said that, one of our most important and exclusive films is the short film by Nii Kwate Owoo around which we ran a series of webinars last year. We are now doing a series of podcasts following up on that. It's a film called *You hide me!*, made in 1970 by a Ghanaian filmmaker who studied film in the UK, who managed to get legitimate access to the British Museum and made an 18-minute film about the African artifacts that are held in the basement of the British Museum. I know the filmmaker very well, I know all of his work, but this particular one was the first film he made. This little film was calling for the restitution of African art. 2020 was the 50th anniversary of that film and we intended to do a series of screenings of it. Then the pandemic came and so the screening series became a series of webinars with partners at The Africa Centre, The African Foundation for Development (AFFORD), and SOAS to present this film and remind people about what its message was back in 1970. When people see the film, they are amazed by how current it is, and so it is now being solicited internationally for its clear, strident, and enduring message of restitution.

Another issue is that a lot of the films in the archive are not exclusive – the films are still ultimately the property of the filmmakers that made them. We work very closely with filmmakers because very often we also have material that contextualises their work and that they didn't collect. Whether it's posters or programmes or publicity material, publications – I used to collect those because while curating and programming, the material was required at different international events. Hence, I also have some scripts and transcripts in the archive, because if I'm taking a British film or an American film to Martinique, at that time in the pre-digital era, using 16- and 35-mm film, they would do electronic subtitling across the bottom of the screen as the film was projected. I would have to provide the transcript or the script, so there are things in the archive that you would not necessarily expect to find. I have scripts relating

**CINEMA
CAN MAKE
A CHANGE
IN THE
WORLD**

A Conversation Between
Ros Gray and June Givanni

to the expectations of programmers and curators regarding useful contacts at festivals and international events, where filmmakers expect you to help them to make strategic connections to industry producers and companies who are also seeking to identify and connect with new talent, or to understand something of the industry the work is coming from. So, you end up with scripts and other materials in that context, and they have become part of the archive. Some materials relate to films existing before I received the scripts/transcripts; some made after; and some relate to films that have not yet been produced (!). So, some elements of the archive also witness and are the result of the business of the industry at the time. This perhaps gives people a sense of what an archive that comes from the pre-digital era might have in it.

Ros Gray – I think there's also a kind of fantasy of accessibility which comes with the digital which actually can't entirely replace the kind of archival work you can do with all the paraphernalia around the film. Some of the important work I've done with research has involved sifting through correspondence, going through the archives of the Communist Party in Paris, or the Bishopsgate Institute in London, which is where Polly Gaster deposited a lot of papers relating to the Committee for Freedom in Mozambique, Angola, and Guinea-Bissau (this was the anti-colonial organisation she set up after having worked with FRELIMO during the armed struggle when they were based in Tanzania). Or the papers and documents and photographs that filmmakers have shown me or shared with me to understand the connections and what it involves to make those films.

June Givani – These kinds of elements are important for what they demonstrate. One of the most valuable posters that we have – valuable in cultural terms – is from the Mogadishu Film Symposium. Mogadishu in Somalia used to run a film week in the early 1980s and there were only two editions of it, and I have a poster from the second edition held there in 1983. It was given to me by one of the filmmakers who was running it at the time, Abdelkadair Said. He gave that to me, I think, at the very first FESPACO¹⁹ I attended in 1985 and he was telling me about that era in Somalia. But when people now think of Somalia, they are amazed that there is evidence which indicates the strong cultural agenda in the country in the '70s and '80s, which is illustrated by the Mogadishu film week. These things witness moments and times and ambitions that different countries had.

**CINEMA
CAN MAKE
A CHANGE
IN THE
WORLD**

A Conversation Between
Ros Gray and June Givanni

¹⁹Festival panafricain du
cinéma et de la télévision
de Ouagadougou.

Another aspect of archives is that they definitely hold a lot of interest with the art world, especially with artists. One of the very first exhibitions we had of our archive was co-curated with the academician Professor Sonia Boyce and Professor Paul Goodwin, and it was done at Chelsea College of Art (teamed with a weekend symposium and exhibition at Birkbeck). That's where we were able to actually showcase a lot of the materials in this archive with the scope that I described above. One of the important things that was evident, for instance, was the Cuban silkscreen film posters that are in the Archive. What I realised was that a lot of young people studying art would never have been able to see those physically. They exist digitally, but to see silkscreen physically, it's the texture that's so important. There are so many levels at which a physical archive can add "experientially" to this idea of an archive, and the value and the beauty, or other dimensions of value in the materials that are held there.

Ros Gray – Some of the most important moments of my research, of course seeing films and hearing people's testimony, but also the powerful experience of physical objects. There's a photograph I reproduced in my book, which hadn't been published before, of Mozambican filmmakers with Angolan filmmakers filming during the South African invasion. This was a photograph that was in the offices of the film production company EBANO – it shows Victor Henriques, João Costa (also known as Funcho), Camilo de Sousa, Licínio Azevedo, and some MPLA soldiers and Francisco Henriques pausing for a moment while filming a documentary together during the South African invasion. When I asked Camilo de Sousa about this image, he said to me: "this is something really important that you must know – their struggle was our struggle too". He said that people might struggle to understand that these days, but when phrases like the "Third world" or "Third Worldism" were used, it's really important to understand what that meant in an affirmative sense. I understood his comment as speaking to the complex politics of that time, and the importance of trying to intervene and carve out a space for an emancipatory socialist politics in the context of the cold war, or across the different continents that you mention. So, there is something that can be crystallised in an image or a photograph that weaves together the personal and the geopolitical and circumstance and so on in a way that you might have to read many, many books in order to capture.

June Givani – Exactly! And that is what is so valuable about the work of Raoul Peck, a Haitian filmmaker who grew up partially in Congo because his parents – together with young Raoul and his brother – were invited to live and work

**CINEMA
CAN MAKE
A CHANGE
IN THE
WORLD**

A Conversation Between
Ros Gray and June Givanni

in post-colonial Congo during Lumumba's time. If you see his film *Lumumba: Death of a Prophet* (1990), it is exactly what you are describing, because it is structured around photographs and things that are in his personal family possessions. There is a lot of family footage and photographs that his mother had from that time and family footage shot by his father intercut with colonial footage about what was happening to Lumumba and how he was being treated and, in the narrative, he gives voice to some of the characters' (presumed) thoughts. This movement back and forth between the personal and the political in terms of reading and redefining and writing a different history and challenging the preconceptions or the inadequate understanding of those histories is so important. And that's why the work of Raoul Peck, at both of those levels, personal and political, is so important. It is combined in his work. He obviously did the feature film *Lumumba* (2000), but *Lumumba: Death of a Prophet* (1991) is the one that actually delivers – in an important way, in the way you were describing now – certain images from that time, when they seemed not as significant, and their significance with history becomes much clearer, though you don't necessarily know it at the time. And when you think that Peck's own personal history and experience is connected into that – it is quite a powerful perspective. That's what I really love about that particular film.

Ros Gray – Something really important it does is tell parts of history that are overlooked. That seems to make an important connection to another filmmaker whose work you have a deep understanding of and engagement with, which is Sembène. I'm thinking about the film he made with the soldiers who had...



Fig. 3 - Still From
Ar Condicionado
(2020) by Fradique.
© Rui Magalhães
(Cafuxi).

**CINEMA
CAN MAKE
A CHANGE
IN THE
WORLD**

A Conversation Between
Ros Gray and June Givanni

²⁰ Sembène, O.
(2020). Statement at
Ouagadougou (1979).
In M. Martin (Ed.), *Black
Camera African Cinema:
Manifesto & Practice for
Cultural Decolonization*,
Part I. Vol. 12, No. 1,
Fall 2020, Vol 12, No.1
(pp. 141-156). Indiana
University Press.

June Givanni – Ah yes, *Camp de Thiaroye* (1988). Another important film with a significant historical context, including some engagement with the African/African diaspora relationship.

Ros Gray – Yes, that film is so important in challenging the dominant narratives through which Europe as an idea is constituted, associated with human rights and so on. The film focuses on the treatment of demobilised soldiers after the second world war, and as such gives a voice to a history which really needs to be more widely known.

June Givanni – Yes. Definitely... That's why this idea of an independent African cinema is so important. You know, at a certain time, a lot of Francophone West African films were being co-produced with the French. And it was important that that particular film was a co-production between partners on the African continent – Senegal, Algeria and Tunisia. That level of independence from reliance on colonial financial production resources is important. It allows the filmmaker (Sembène) to present a different record of an historical event, a topic that is important to exist and to be seen, especially where it presents a challenge to the “official” French colonial narrative of what happened at Camp Thiaroye. Sembène was an ardent exponent of this, right from the beginning. He had a strident voice, in a physical sense, when he spoke. And in this new book that has come out, under the series *Black Camera*, (the first in a series that is being edited around FESPACO), in one of the pieces, Sembène wrote – actually a speech he gave – where he talks about his own inspiration for working as a filmmaker, what he does, what he thinks are the priorities²⁰. He talks you through it in terms of his own artistic and political development. *Black Camera* is an international film journal published by the University of Indiana and they were partners with us, June Givanni Pan-African Cinema Archive (JGPACA),

**CINEMA
CAN MAKE
A CHANGE
IN THE
WORLD**

A Conversation Between
Ros Gray and June Givanni

²¹ Gray, R. (2012),
Cinema on the Cultural
Front: Filmmaking in the
Mozambican Revolution.
In *The Journal of African
Cinemas*, January.

for the presentation of our FESPACO stand at the 2019 FESPACO film festival, which was the 50th anniversary of FESPACO. As part of that 50th anniversary, this book was published, which was a collaboration between FESPACO and Indiana University/*Black Camera Journal*. In this book, which features a lot of eloquent writers on African cinema, you will find Sembène's text. It's the first part of a three-part series, but there is this section on Sembène in the form of a statement he made in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, in 1979. Sembène was someone very close to Thomas Sankara, who was soon to become one of the young revolutionary leaders on the continent at the time. If you heard what Sankara had to say (during the years I attended, when Sankara was still alive, FESPACO 1985 and 1987) about revolutionary cinema, it was clear he was somebody who deeply understood its liberating potential, the transformative power of African cinema. During that time this young revolutionary leader of Burkina Faso would invite 12 filmmakers to lunch almost every day during the film festival, where he would discuss cinema with them. He was very popular and still is today in Burkina and as a revolutionary figure internationally.

Ros Gray – It strikes me that Sankara, Amílcar Cabral, and Samora Machel all shared that passion for cinema. They all believed that it was very important to nurture filmmakers, but also that cinema had a very particular role to play in social change. That seems to be something they shared in terms of a cultural politics and an understanding of cinema. In Mozambique they used to talk about cinema being part of a cultural front.²¹

June Givani – And of course they are all grounded in the Fanonian concept of decolonisation. They desperately believed in it. Because with a populace or a country, you've got a civilisation that is being pushed in a particular direction during the colonial era, with its attendant values and influences. And how do you encourage people to look back at what they have inside themselves and at what they can determine for themselves? When you read Sembène you can see that he totally believes and understood that as well. And most of the movements from that time, both politically and culturally, were around both political decolonisation, but of the mind also.

Ros Gray – Decolonisation is not just about deconstructing and dismantling colonial frameworks, but also about a whole set of aspirations. I was just reminded of Robert Van Lierop, who directed *A Luta Continua* in Mozambique during the armed struggle and later after independence the film *O Povo Organizado*.

**CINEMA
CAN MAKE
A CHANGE
IN THE
WORLD**

A Conversation Between
Ros Gray and June Givanni

²²Sembène is quoted as saying "For me, the cinema is the best evening school.

It not only enables me to do more and to go further than literature, but it also lets people speak in their own language". That is the Wolof language in this case.

"I don't want to make films with Africans speaking French, the way it would be spoken at the Académie, the Assemblée nationale or in the courts." (See Annett Busch and max Annas. Ousmane Sembène Interviews, 2008.

One of the things he wanted to do with *A Luta Continua*, of course he wanted to contribute to FRELIMO's struggle, but he also wanted his film to have an impact in the United States in terms of the African American communities that he was a part of and the struggle there. He felt that there were things that could be learned from FRELIMO's struggle in terms of ideas of self-reliance and the importance of childcare, for example, in the armed struggle. *A Luta Continua* was also smuggled into Apartheid South Africa and projected in the run-up to the Soweto Uprising. So, it's also about an idea of cinema being a conduit for ideas that can be exchanged, discussed, and adapted to new contexts. The pamphlets that were produced for use during the screenings of *A Luta Continua* are incredibly beautifully put together. They are such good teaching tools in terms of informing people about Mozambique, in terms of suggesting discussion points and questions, and in terms of follow-up actions that people could take. So that film is really exemplary in terms of the multiple directions in which its political ambitions are aimed all at the same time.

June Givani – That resonates, because Sembène is always quoted as having said that his films or African cinema (I think he was talking at the time about his films, I don't want to misquote him) – can be seen as "night school for the masses"²². But I think he was talking not so much about documentaries as about dramatic films, which introduce people to different ideas and different ways of thinking about themselves and their potential agency in the world in which they live. You can see this from his work, but also when he talks about cinema and about cinema in Africa. It's simplistic to say night school for the masses, but I understand what he means in terms of the role that cinema can play in people's lives. It's so important what you're saying, this idea that you can quite consciously present to people that they might be able to understand the world in a different way; a way that might be meaningful in terms of their life, their role in the world, as an agent of change.

Ros Gray – Perhaps that's a really good note to conclude on, with an affirmation of the agency of cinema to make change in the world.

**CINEMA
CAN MAKE
A CHANGE
IN THE
WORLD**

A Conversation Between
Ros Gray and June Giovanni

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MARCELA CANTUÁRIA AND LATIN AMERICAN CINEMA:

Painting and Documentary
from an Anti-Hegemonic
Perspective

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**MARCELA
CANTUÁRIA
AND LATIN
AMERICAN
CINEMA:**

Painting and Documentary
from an Anti-Hegemonic
Perspective

In an interesting passage from his notes to the Theses on the concept of history by Walter Benjamin (1940), he proposes a new definition of revolution, which seems very current: 'Marx said that revolutions are the engine of world history. But perhaps things will look different. It may be that revolutions are the act by which humanity travelling on the train pulls the emergency brakes.' Implicitly, the image suggests that if humanity allows the train to go on its way - already traced by the iron structure of the tracks - and nothing stops its vertiginous run, we are heading straight for disaster.

Michael Löwy (2013)

One of the possible ways of bringing the revolution closer to the field of art is based on the possible crossings between the social context and the strategies adopted by artists. Workers intertwined with artistic, theoretical, and curatorial production often unite around projects engaged in understanding the world around them and from there positions are adopted and speeches are elaborated. The second half of the twentieth century witnessed an intense unleashing of forces between hegemony and counter-hegemony in the field of culture. In this sense, the philosophers Walter Benjamin (1892 - 1940) and Michael Löwy (1938) point to a certain understanding of the revolution as a deviation from a direction that is destined to end. One of the specifics of our time is perhaps the effort to think not only about the postulations presented by creators, but also to question the effectiveness and reach of such ideas in contact with the different agents involved. In view of the multiple concepts presented to discuss this theme, I am interested in thinking about the possible bridges between our present and the symbolic universe articulated within the arts, questioning how the formulations of this field are presented, and what engagements can be expected with such work.

The historiography of decolonial art, or any term that can be crossed by these postulations, is used by me – from my background in philosophy and art history –, as a dual method for considering the structure of proposed formulations. The historiography of art is a field delimited by bases established during the 19th century, and which has undergone numerous reformulations demanded by new lines of thought in the late 20th century. We could consider some basic productions to think about historiography, art, and politics.

**MARCELA
CANTUÁRIA
AND LATIN
AMERICAN
CINEMA:**

Painting and Documentary
from an Anti-Hegemonic
Perspective

Some publications from the 1980s announce the end of certain narrative forms with regard to the historiography of art, anticipating propositions that today are outlined from conceptual keys such as colonial, decolonial and anti-colonial. Although they are productions in the field of theory and historiography, there are countless similarities with the position of thinkers from different areas. The field of art history finds fertile ground for re-elaborations about the social dynamics that defined its own constitution, as there are many possibilities for formulating critical thinking in the face of the artistic production of Western civilisation and its historiography, which sought to analyse art chronologically, establishing a periodisation marked by distinctive and influential characteristics.

As art historian Douglas Crimp in *On the Museum's Ruins* (1980), published in *October* magazine, and later giving the title to a collection published in 1993, this view no longer imposes itself as a single path, with the focus shifting rather to the work of art and its discursive context, associating institutional criticism, considering aesthetic and political contexts, and forming a postmodern critique of institutions. In the same sense, art theorists publish texts like *The End of Art History?* (1983) by Hans Belting and *The End of Art* (1984) by Arthur Danto, which abandon traditional criteria of writing in favour of a deep review of what constitutes the field of artistic manifestation. Both Belting and Danto elaborate critical models of the traditional conception that marked the development of art history since the Renaissance while considering the criticism formulated in the 20th century based on modern artistic production. The unique constitution of art history as a modern teleological product was no longer possible, creating a crisis in the history of art as a European science. Belting claims that:

What the art history discipline, with great effort, had canonized - the ideal order, where everything obeys the rules of art history - contemporary art tends to decanonize. This system of hierarchy and historical classification is being invaded by artists, who are now appropriating the past, without worrying about justifying its reinterpretation without the ordered discourse of art history. (Belting, 1987, p.61)

In the argumentative matrix of the theoretical we find Denise Ferreira da Silva's reflection on contemporary art, which proposes the dismantling of the aesthetic premises defended by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804) and establishes from this parameter a “generative locus for engaging

**MARCELA
CANTUÁRIA
AND LATIN
AMERICAN
CINEMA:**

Painting and Documentary
from an Anti-Hegemonic
Perspective

¹This is our translation.
In the original: "locus generativo para o engajamento em uma reflexão radical sobre as modalidades de subjugação racial (simbólica) e colonial (jurídica) que operam com plena força no presente global".

²This is our translation.
In the original: "assim entendendo o pensamento hegemônico de representatividade que vemos nos museus. Penso que a pintura seja uma boa forma para dar conta dessa historicidade e na medida que agrega cores, nuances, vibrações para certos registros, daí nesse ponto é onde acredito que nasça esse encantamento. Percebi, de uns tempos pra cá, que eu era bem carente de informação sobre as pessoas encantadas do Brasil profundo, da América Latina de uma forma geral, essa carência me moveu a mergulhar mais na pintura e na representação desses corpos políticos".

³This is our translation.
In the original: "a cultura visual é um dos recursos fundamentais para a construção da hegemonia, mas é também um terreno fértil para exercícios contra-hegemônicos".

in a radical reflection on the modalities of racial (symbolic) and colonial (legal) subjugation that operate with full force in the global present"¹ (Ferreira, 2019, p. 46). Along with this formulation, we can consider multiple projects that attest to a lag in the current modes of enjoyment, exhibition, and critical formulation. I do not shy away from considering that, in our time, we have witnessed an increase in the emergence of narratives and iconographies once subjected to colonial processes of artistic and cultural interpretation. In that sense, it is worth recalling *Sociología de la imagen* (2015), by Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, where she contributes to the promotion of possibilities for (re)elaborating pasts from a critical positioning towards the traditional regime of image circulation.

This essay aims to shed light on this issue by addressing the interweavings between Brazilian painter Marcela Cantuária and the Latin American cine-documentary, based on an interest in changing the social context more than strictly plastic-visual dialogues, even though these exist at the root in the composition of the work. In an interview, Marcela Cantuária affirms that she is always engaged in a constant exercise, proposing arcs that cross historical time, touching events that are little represented in a sensory sense and:

thus understanding the hegemonic thought of representativeness that we see in museums. I think that painting is a good way to account for this historicity and, as it adds colours, nuances, vibrations for certain records, that's where I believe this enchantment is born. I have realised, for some time now, that I was very lacking in information about the enchanted people of deep Brazil, of Latin America in general. And this lack moved me to further explore the painting and representation of these political bodies.² (Cantuária, 2020)

In this sense, Argentinian historian and political activist Ezequiel Adamovsky states that "visual culture is one of the fundamental resources for the construction of hegemony, but it is also fertile ground for counter-hegemonic exercises"³ (Adamovsky, 2016, p.158). Art history, in turn, deals with issues and works that show power relations and their legitimation. In the field of Brazilian colonial studies, considering this approach, "any account of modernity that does not take into account the impact of the colonial experience in the formation of modern power relations is not only incomplete but also ideological" (Castro-Goméz, 2000, p. 152). This is an important reflection given the current struggles for the emancipation of peoples and the growing movements of insurrection in the face

**MARCELA
CANTUÁRIA
AND LATIN
AMERICAN
CINEMA:**

Painting and Documentary
from an Anti-Hegemonic
Perspective

⁴This is our translation. In the original: "proporcionam novas visões de um mundo comum, para que as exploremos e compreendamos. [...] A interpretação é uma questão de compreender como a forma ou organização do filme transmite significados e valores".

of the structures of modern societies and institutions. Artists, filmmakers and theorists have been gathering and making tangible concerns and reflections dear to our society, including a focus on the urgent problems that threaten the continuity of life on the planet.

Given this, to what extent would it be possible to establish closeness between cinematographic and pictorial production with the action of decolonisation movements? We consider the contributions of cinema theorist Bill Nichols, who turns to the task of thinking about social documentary and its application to Latin American film reality. Nichols writes that social representation documentaries "provide new visions of a common world, so that we can explore and understand them. [...] Interpretation is a matter of understanding how the form or organisation of the film conveys meanings and values"⁴ (Nichols, 2005, p.14).

The field of historiography of current art makes me think of approximations between languages, concepts and worldviews, and from these intersections I develop not only texts, but other cultural projects. The ancient methods of writing in the field of art were often guided by criteria of valuation and distinction, which in no way contribute to the research of artists, the public's point of view, or the political, affective or dream dimensions that permeate such work. For some time I have dedicated myself to the possibilities of deviating and expanding the areas of debate, thinking about how to articulate anti-hegemonic narratives through visualities. New reports of legitimation seek to open interpretive cracks in the narratives already established as canons of culture and social history, questioning the coherence of an epistemological, historical, and moral macro-subject. When associated with the history of art, decolonial perspectives show proximity to government policies, which, formulated under an abstract system of scientific rules, result in measures that legitimise state regulatory policies.

Departing from Marcela Cantuária's solo exhibition held in 2019, *La larga noche de los 500 años (A Gentil Carioca)*, we developed a curatorial project that included the creation of a glossary with 42 entries, considering as a starting point the exhaustion of the visible world and the figuration of life prophecies (Figure 1). This survey is guided by ancient indigenous prophecies, which warn that this long night begun with the arrival of Europeans on the continent, and is ended under a reorganisation from which the dawn of a beneficial and glorious time for the people will emerge. Not surprisingly, the Atacama Desert appears in the composition, simultaneously split into two distinct times, and represented as one of the driest places in the world. Although it functioned as a space for plundering violence by the dictatorship, this desert is also the stage for

**MARCELA
CANTUÁRIA
AND LATIN
AMERICAN
CINEMA:**

Painting and Documentary
from an Anti-Hegemonic
Perspective

the rare flowering of the desert, a phenomenon also known as the “miracle of Atacama”. In this painting, that place previously immersed in the dust of the past is simultaneously disordered by this unpredictable natural phenomenon, becoming transformed into sublime flower gardens. *The Caboclo* (1834) by Jean-Baptiste Debret points to the moon announcing the arrival of a social and mystical reordering, and in this sense it is worth considering the phrase that gives the title to the work, which also evokes the anti-systemic political discourse of the *Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee of the Zapatista* army handed down in 1994. This temporal overlap also establishes axes of contact with Cusicanqui's proposals, insofar as in the aphorism of the Aymara worldview “*Quipnayra uñtasis sarnaqapxañani*”, we find the statement:

se puede traducir como “mirando atrás y adelante podemos caminar en el presente futuro”. Quiere decir que el pasado está por delante de nosotros. Esto es común a muchas lenguas indígenas. Hay varias lenguas indígenas que conciben el pasado como algo que tu ves por delante; el futuro, sin embargo, no lo conoces y por eso está atrás, en la espalda. Además es también una celebración de un gesto anacrónico, de poner el pasado por delante, de que el pasado surge e irrumpe en el presente. (Cusicanqui, as cited in, Barber, 2019)



Fig. 1 - Marcela Cantuária. *La larga noche de los 500 años*, 2019. Oil and acrylic on canvas and table. 270 x 500 cm. Installation view at Galeria Gentil Carioca, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. © Vicente de Mello.

**MARCELA
CANTUÁRIA
AND LATIN
AMERICAN
CINEMA:**

Painting and Documentary
from an Anti-Hegemonic
Perspective

⁵This is our translation. In the original: "discurso coletivo contra o subdesenvolvimento e o colonialismo da dependência".

⁶This is our translation. In the original: "De um lado, recorriam a representações de realidades sociais mais explícitas (ou seja, o oposto do que fazia, por exemplo, o cinema de massa hollywoodiano), enquanto, de outro, os experimentalismos nada teóricos – entendidos como práticos, pois trabalhavam com pessoas e material que tinham em mãos – pareciam até anular o conceito de "produto" final a ser assistido, posto que as propostas ao espectador eram outras. Longe de apenas entreter o público, este cinema, em tudo e desde o princípio, convergia para uma formação que vinha a favor de mudanças sociais e de uma "descolonização cultural" dos países em questão, notadamente abundantes de cultura e tradição próprias (sobretudo popular e indígena)".

The images and narratives present in several films, such as *Las compañeras tienen grado* (1995) by Guadalupe Miranda and María Inés Roqué, and *Guardiana de los ríos* (2016) directed by Katia Lara, can be central elements for an approach that pictorially instrumentalised insurgent utopian monuments / images that guide a refusal of the official narrative. When composing a cross-border grammar, Marcela questions colonial legacies, giving centrality to the possible approximations between the history of environmental degradation, the exploitation of work and female protagonism, and establishing connections between social factors erased or disregarded by traditional historiography.

I propose a path where encounters may be possible, although never definitive or understood as the only way of interpretation, since we are only able to establish a dialogue between interests, contexts, and the continuity of debate. Who guided me to start this journey presented here was the researcher Diego Riquelme, who outlines approximations between different Latin American cinematographies of the 1960s and 1970s, arguing that despite the diverse and complex cultural and political differences, there is a point that unites part of this production. In his thesis *Documentary cinema in Latin American integration* (2011), this point would be the "collective discourse against underdevelopment and the colonialism of dependence"⁵ (Riquelme, 2011, p.22). According to his words, these filmmakers:

On the one hand, they used more explicit representations of social realities (that is, the opposite of what Hollywood mass cinema did, for example), while, on the other, experimentalism that was not at all theoretical - understood as practical, since they worked with people and material they had at hand. They even seemed to cancel the concept of the final "product" to be watched, since the proposals to the spectator were different. Far from merely entertaining the public, this cinema, in everything and from the outset, converged towards a formation that favours social changes and a "cultural decolonisation" of the countries in question, notably abundant with their own culture and tradition (especially popular and indigenous).⁶ (*Idem*, p.8)

This same period is analysed by the historian Mônica Lima in *Cinema and Revolution in Argentina* (2008), focusing on the performance of the Cine Liberación Group, an Argentine cinematographic movement that took place in the late 1960s, proposing a more explicit engagement in social and political

**MARCELA
CANTUÁRIA
AND LATIN
AMERICAN
CINEMA:**

Painting and Documentary
from an Anti-Hegemonic
Perspective

⁷This is our translation.
In the original: "um dos
principais meios de
expressão escolhidos
pelos artistas de
esquerda".

movements. Creating works concerned with Latin American integration and the advance of expropriation, Mônica Lima understands cinema as an art with wide potential to reach the masses, soon becoming "one of the main means of expression chosen by leftist artists"⁷ (Lima, 2008, p. 14), but pointing out that all artistic manifestations can occupy a significant role in the defence of national autonomy and in raising the awareness of populations regarding the repeated strategies implemented in favour of the continuation of neocolonial domination.

I turned increasingly towards experimental processes, which can unfold either in the field of curatorship, historiography, video, painting, or any other expressive medium that serves strategically as a discursive field of conflict, which even though it unfolds in the field of the symbolic, the crossings with the social world, and all its organisational categories, guides us to an invitation to interpose between fiction, politics, art, and the imaginary. The initial question arises in an attempt to understand mechanisms for producing difference in times of globalisation and precariousness, since when we turn to contemporary artistic practices, we find not only fabulations around the consolidation of power figures, but we also find proposals that they work towards the denaturalisation and dismantling of the canonical order of art history. Outstanding Latin American filmmakers active in the early second half of the twentieth century, tied to the practices of political activism and aiming at social transformation, film their productions and simultaneously launch their guidelines. We can highlight: *Hacia un tercer cine: Apuntes y experiencias para el desarrollo de un cine de liberación en el Tercer Mundo* (grupo Cine Liberación, Argentina); *Uma Estética da Fome* (Glauber Rocha, Brasil); *Cinema Urgente* (Santiago Alvarez, Cuba); *Fotodocumentários* (Fernando Birri, Argentina); *Cinema Popular* (Nelson Pereira dos Santos, Brasil); *Por um cinema imperfeito* (Julio García-Espinosa; Cuba); *Teoria e Prática de um Cinema Junto ao Povo* (Grupo Ukamau, Bolívia).

Thinking about cinema in its relationship with the possibility of formulating imaginary states, the French technologist Gilbert Simondon (1924-1989) claims it would soon be an activity "capable of creating concepts itself, whose use is learnt in the manipulation of cinematographic realities, but which can be extended and even universalised to the point of constituting a true worldview" (Simondon, 2014, as cited in, Miglorin et al, 2016). Although within the traditional structures of circulation of knowledge-power, researchers propose ways and schemes of dismantling the onto-epistemological bases that shape the modern subject, presenting a reflection of modernity as a project that is understood from the perspective of "the existence of a central authority from which the mechanisms of control over the natural and social world are

**MARCELA
CANTUÁRIA
AND LATIN
AMERICAN
CINEMA:**

Painting and Documentary
from an Anti-Hegemonic
Perspective

dispensed and coordinated” (Castro-Gómez, 2000, p.147).

In line with this debate, Dr. Luiz Rufino, in *Pedagogia da Encruzilhada* (2018), proposes a poetic/political/ethical project based on the figure of Exu, working as:

a reflective principle of the world translated in the diaspora that deals with events, movements, ambivalence, the unfinished, and paths as possibilities; the element that underlies and substantiates border actions, resilience and transgression, codified in pedagogical form⁸ (Rufino, 2018, p. 73).

Likewise, we can find the impact of pedagogical propositions directly related to the pictorial record of events in political history, thus defining the genre of historical painting, an artistic genre with a central role in the civilising project, dictating compositions resulting from the narrative and imaginary ambition of representing the past in order to reaffirm its importance. Historically, the dimensions of this genre have stimulated the search for novel solutions to compositional challenges. Marcela Cantuária subverts this genre, transfiguring it as a powerful metaphor of resistance to the attack on the ways of existence of the original communities. Some of her works feature a constant presence of stills, subtitles, and filmographic narratives, with the constitution of an archive of scenes of Latin American insurgencies forming the basis for her painting.

Marcela Cantuária substantiates territorial crises, adopting an anti-colonial position and taking as the starting point for her artistic propositions the exhaustion of the world and the terminal crisis of vital energies. In *On the concept of history* (1940), Walter Benjamin establishes the images of the past as a reference to non-disappearance, fostering the recognition of leaders and political trajectories. Marcela refuses to identify with the official narrative and opts for a counter-reading, pictorially instrumentalising utopian insurgent monuments / images and integrating the history of social exclusion, the exploitation of work, and environmental degradation. Issues linked to the exploitation of natural resources emerge with the utmost urgency, given the expansion of parasitic policies towards planetary natural resources. Parallels can be drawn between the interests of the artist and those of researcher Victor Wallis, who says the only habitable future is eco-socialist (Wallis, 2018), recognising that “the most radical expressions of environmental awareness”⁹ are originated by the peoples of the global South. Thus, peasant and indigenous leaders become the target of different processes of annihilation and silencing

⁸This is our translation. In the original: “princípio reflexivo de mundo trasladado na diáspora que versa acerca dos acontecimentos, dos movimentos, da ambivalência, do inacabamento e dos caminhos enquanto possibilidades, é o elemento que assenta e substância as ações de fronteira, resiliência e transgressão, codificadas em forma pedagogia”.

⁹Quoted by Cy Gonick in Exploring Ecosocialism as a System of Thought, *Canadian Dimension*, Vol. 44 No. 5, Sept/Oct 2010.

**MARCELA
CANTUÁRIA
AND LATIN
AMERICAN
CINEMA:**

Painting and Documentary
from an Anti-Hegemonic
Perspective

¹⁰ Accordingly to the data of Global Witness - GW (2014) research.

¹¹ This is our translation. In the original: "De acordo com a nossa visão de mundo, no rio vivem os espíritos, sobretudo femininos, que são guardiões de todos os rios da cordilheira Puca Opalaca, onde estão situadas dezenas de comunidades lenças. Há um significado espiritual muito profundo e isto explica as razões poderosas que as comunidades têm para se defender das pressões exercidas pelas empresas, para tomar posse de seus territórios e de seus recursos". Trucchi, G., Projeto hidrelétrico gera repressão e morte, denuncia dirigente indígena hondurenha. *Opera Mundi*, 28/07/2013.

¹² Cáceres, B., Honduran environment and human rights activist, murdered. Murder of activist Berta Cáceres sparks violent clashes in Honduras. *The Guardian*, 04/03/2016.

due to the persecution of popular struggles opposed to the extractive interests of international conglomerates.

One of the leaders we highlight is Berta Cáceres (1971–2016), a leader from the Lenca community who organised a campaign against the project of the Honduran company Desarrollos Energéticos SA (DESA), located in the northwest area of Honduras within indigenous territory and on the waters of the Gualcarque River. Honduras has emerged as an epicentre of reflections on environmental issues, as it is considered the most dangerous country in the world for forest and river protection activists.¹⁰ The planning of the construction of the hydroelectric plant was the result of a partnership between DESA, the Chinese company Sinohydro and the International Finance Corporation (IFC), a member of the World Bank Group. The project was financed with loans from the Entrepreneurial Development Bank (FMO), and from the Central American Bank for Economic Integration. In an interview, when denouncing the repression and death resulting from this project, Berta said:

According to our worldview, spirits, especially female, live on the river. They are guardians of all the rivers in the Puca Opalaca mountain range, where dozens of Lenca communities are located. There is a very deep spiritual meaning, and this explains the powerful motivation of communities to defend themselves from the pressures exerted by companies to take possession of their territories and their resources.¹¹

With a life marked by activism in favour of the emancipation of original peoples, in March 2016 Berta was executed at her home in an action that featured the explicit collaboration of the Honduran army, according to articles published in the British newspaper *The Guardian*.¹² Posthumous tributes evoke her as "Guardiana de los ríos", the title of the documentary directed by her sister Katia Lara, released in the same year of her death, which presents narratives of her extermination under the perspective of Miriam Miranda, an activist partner of Berta, and other family members, who discuss not only the processes that led to her murder, but also the potential of her memory as a tool for emancipation.

In *Berta Cáceres* (2019) (Figure 2), Marcela rescues that insurgent memory, featuring the heroine crowned by the undines – female spirits of the waters. It is an ode to her memory and actions, a guide for the continuity of the struggle with the criteria for defining socio-environmental policies. Proximities can be established between Berta's case and that of agribusiness, since the

MARCELA CANTUÁRIA AND LATIN AMERICAN CINEMA:

Painting and Documentary from an Anti-Hegemonic Perspective

¹³ Accordingly to the data of Global Witness - GW (2015) research.

¹⁴ This is our translation. In the original: "a cultura da imagem é a ferramenta pela qual artistas e escritores das diversas áreas artísticas manifestam suas ideias e falam para o povo".

agribusiness production chain is responsible for many executions, a determining factor in the inclusion of Brazil in the list of countries of the highest risk to activists and defenders of the land and the environment.¹³ Cuzicanqui claims that the anaesthetic effects of consumerism have lost their effectiveness, and in this confusing time we witness the aggravation and explanation of violence and expropriatory violations (Cuzicanqui, 2015, p. 450). Anthropologist Néstor García Canclini points out that culture can be claimed as a fundamental part of education and information, coming to stand out as a channel for articulating political processes: "image culture is the tool by which artists and writers from different artistic fields express their ideas and speak to the people"¹⁴ (Canclini, 1984, p. 25).



Fig. 2 - Marcela Cantuária - *Berta Cáceres*, 2019. Oil, acrylic and spray on canvas 160 x 120 cm. © Vicente de Mello.

MARCELA CANTUÁRIA AND LATIN AMERICAN CINEMA:

Painting and Documentary from an Anti-Hegemonic Perspective

¹⁵This is our translation. In the original: "retirar as armas das mãos de dois dirigentes mortos do Partido Comunista do Brasil (PCdoB) numa foto histórica. Segundo evidências da Comissão da Verdade, a própria polícia teria interferido de forma bastante direta na criação dessa imagem-memória, plantando armas nas mãos dos dois comunistas como justificativa para assassiná-los brutalmente".

¹⁶For more details see: Nossa, L. (2012). *Mata! O Major Curió e as Guerrilhas no Araguaia*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras.

In *Pachakuti: The historical horizons of internal colonialism* (1991), Cusicanqui a that part of the nation that considers reform only as a power struggle between political parties, thus going through a moment of blindness, which reveals dark aspects of the present day. In this context of intensification and dispute, when turning to Marcela Cantuária's painting, journalist Sofia Lucchesi evoked the documentary *The Edge of Democracy* (2019) by filmmaker Petra Costa, insofar as both employ the readjustment of images that are already in the world, such as when Petra chooses:

to take the weapons out of the hands of two dead leaders of the Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB) in a historic photo. According to evidence from the Truth Commission, the police itself would have interfered quite directly in the creation of this image, planting weapons in the hands of the two communists as a justification for brutally murdering them.¹⁵ (Lucchesi, 2020)

This same image file is used in another work by Marcela, which makes reference to the memory of the Brazilian guerrilla Lúcia Maria de Souza (1944–1973) (Figure 3). The painting *Sônia* (2019) (Figure 4) alludes to this figure who was ambushed by an army patrol on 24 October 1973 during Operation Marajoara, the third and definitive military offensive against the Araguaia Guerrilla, a guerrilla movement existing in the Brazilian Amazon region between the late 1960s and the first half of the 1970s. Records of a conversation between João Figueiredo, the head of the Military Cabinet of Médici, and Ernesto Geisel in February 1974 reveal that a major found an armed girl and asked her name, and she answered: "– Guerrilla has no name. The guerrilla response is this!"¹⁶, followed by a burst of machine gun fire at the major. This episode, narrated according to the documentation of the Private Archives of Golbery do Couto e Silva (APGCS), contains some errors, with subsequent information attesting that Sônia did not have a machine gun but a revolver, which wounded Major Curió in the arm, merely disarming him. Another shot knocked Major Lício Augusto Maciel down, driving a bullet under his right eye, which tore the roof of his mouth, knocked out several teeth and left him deaf in his left ear. Both shots were fired when she was already on the ground. Her body was left unburied in the woods and never found.



Fig. 3 - Lúcia Maria de Souza. Photo included in the file *Memories of the Dictatorship*.

**MARCELA
CANTUÁRIA
AND LATIN
AMERICAN
CINEMA:**

Painting and Documentary
from an Anti-Hegemonic
Perspective

Elio Gaspari, in *A Ditadura Escancarada* (2014), turns to the violence used against the Araguaia guerrillas, at that moment one of the last nuclei of political resistance at the time. Sônia is at the centre of an episode that involves three generals who occupied the position of president of Brazil during the military dictatorship and a guerrilla labelled a “fanatic” for dedicating her last breath to the radical struggle for social change. Lúcia, who was a member of the Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB), had abandoned medical school in the 4th year due to persecution and repression. She joined the Guerrilha do Araguaia and became famous as a midwife, playing an important role in the community serving riverside families. Cantuária’s composition uses the moon as a mystical element where a foetus alludes to birth and continuous flow in earthly life, bringing to the foreground the portrait of a victim of state terrorism crossed by narratives that reorient both the place of the military apparatus and the machinery of insurgent lives, but also the courage that propelled a young woman who bathes naked in a *kamikaze* fight against two officers trained by the authoritarian government. A feminine narrative can thus gain other contours, which escape the traditional frameworks given to the feminine, both in painting and in the history of armed confrontations.



Fig. 4 - Marcela Cantuária - *Lúcia de Souza "Sônia"*, 2019.
Oil and spray on canvas 160 x 120 cm.
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**MARCELA
CANTUÁRIA
AND LATIN
AMERICAN
CINEMA:**

Painting and Documentary
from an Anti-Hegemonic
Perspective

¹⁷This is our translation. In the original: "fonte de (re) educação da consciência e da sensibilidade de si mesmos, bem como de seu povo e de toda uma geração".

The documentary *Las compañeras tienen grado* (1995), directed by Guadalupe Miranda and María Inés Roqué, operates from the overlapping of interviews with revolutionary comrades fighting in the EZLN, occupying prominent logistical, tactical, and practical roles in the guerrilla. Although this documentary was made in the 1990s, we can find similarities with cinematographic activism an important front of opposition to American imperialism which can be summed up as a "source of (re) education of conscience and sensitivity of themselves, their people and an entire generation"¹⁷ (Riquelme, 2011, p. 7).

In light of the points raised in this essay, we interconnected documentaries and paintings based on their critical positioning and capability of articulating a poetics of memory in favour of the emancipation of the imaginary, tensioning themes such as political cinema, contemporary painting, and Latin America. I conclude with an invitation to consider the role of the intellectual and the artist from the debate of *the First Meeting of Chilean filmmakers*, which took place in 1966, where participants thought about the creation of a new Latin American cinema as a common challenge and sought an original aesthetic, aiming at the consolidation of a unique identity in the international panorama, but which, in turn, had as its underlying project a reflection on the problems peculiar to Latin America, such as underdevelopment, the abuse of power, great social inequalities, authoritarianism, and the struggle for democracy (Villaça, 2002).

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**MARCELA
CANTUÁRIA
AND LATIN
AMERICAN
CINEMA:**

Painting and Documentary
from an Anti-Hegemonic
Perspective

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A RIP IN TIME:

Crime and Poetry
in *Malunguinho*

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**A RIP
IN TIME:**
Crime and Poetry
in *Malunguinho*

When poet Miró da Muribeca's voice-over opens the short film *Malunguinho* (directed by Felipe Peres Calheiros and screened at the Rio International Film Festival in 2013), declaring that, for once, the film title will not be a written one, and the screen will remain black, the spectator is met with a layered justification for this: the usual owners of letters and histories have reduced the trajectory of black people to criminal records. The narrator goes on to state, however, that orality has resisted, inflicted a rip in time ("rasgar o tempo"), and keeps confronting the official histories surrounding the death of Malunguinho. It is precisely this audiovisual device (sound against image, visuals contradicting the written truths) and its original, postmodern quality that Miró reveals in the first minutes of the film. Disputing the deep-seated and one-sided details behind the killing of a 19th-century black leader, the film proposes a different temporality for Malunguinho's story. Instead of a figure that was merely defiant to the Portuguese Crown and which fell in combat, he persists as a worshipped, symbolic figure. A presence in contemporary religious practices (namely the "Jurema Sagrada") in the Brazilian Northeast (where the film was conceived and shot), *Malunguinho* crosses two realms that constantly clash in Brazilian society: an institutional, militarised, written experience of history, rooted in colonisation and slavery; and a poetic, spiritual, musical, affective way of living that has stood the test of time in other ways. Here I will briefly explore how Peres Calheiros aesthetically invites us to travel to a paradoxical past-present time, where "slaughter and persecution" still haunt the lives of Malunguinho's descendants, but where poetry and rituals also provide a necessary outlet for a violent history.

Into the woods of present-day cities Camaragibe and Paudalho, in the state of Pernambuco, the film shows a black woman looking around, seemingly lost. She listens to the forest's sounds, as if searching for guidance. The choice for this particular setting evinces the film's fascination with a certain presence. According to historian Marcus Carvalho (1991), it was in similar sites in the suburbs of Recife that leaders from *quilombos* (resistance settlements founded by people of African descent) popularised the name Malunguinho. Probably combining identities of different men who fought against the destruction of quilombos by the Monarchy, this name gained recognition across the states of Brazil and inside communities. The official records, retrieved from Pernambuco's public archive and read out aloud by Miró da Muribeca, come in only after a striking fire scene. Illegal burning in cane fields is still prevalent in Brazil, and the film suggests a sensorial opening to understanding the role of nature within this universe. Quilombos were known to be self-sufficient communities: Jurema

**A RIP
IN TIME:**
Crime and Poetry
in *Malunguinho*

is a plant-extracted beverage, and the wilderness represented refuge and ways to deceive the enemies in those times. *Estrepes* (a form of caltrops) would have been one of Malunguinho's strategies to protect the quilombolas. To this day, Jurema's practitioners sing the verses: "Malunguinho, tira as estrepes do caminho" ("Malunguinho, take the caltrops out of the way"). Dating from 1829, the first criminal files relate a shocking plea for annihilating the blacks that had fought back against the military, calling them cannibals. What we see, however, is a muted glimpse of a Jurema ritual (clapping and dancing in different, yellow-lit perspectives) in a gut-wrenching contrast – in regimes of visual truth, but in accordance with an informational tradition, what should we believe in? The director saves the music for a more impactful moment later on, but in setting the tension between State facts and popular practices through the juxtaposition of image and sound, he evokes the conflicted existence of the film's protagonist.



Fig. 1 - Still taken from *Malunguinho* by Peres Calheiros: the woman, into the woods, mystified by a certain presence. © Felipe Peres Calheiro.

At daylight, a black man chops a tree, in a reimagining of Malunguinho's historical period (as we glean from his and the previous woman's costumes). Distinctively, the camera's perspective shakes with each blow of the axe, and the echoing sounds in the background slowly fade into the forest's hum – a somehow delicate transition that touches on the temporal ruptures that Miró da Muribeca wrote about. This serves to introduce a non-verbal, minimalistic

**A RIP
IN TIME:**
Crime and Poetry
in *Malunguinho*

portrayal of the woman we have seen earlier, running away from the sound of trotting horses and the silhouettes of armed men as night falls. The film's climax builds over distorted music that grows in unison with a huge and beautiful smoke column. Miró da Muribeca then reads another appeal to an authority referred to as "Your Honour" to ambush and exterminate the "evil" blacks. This appeal was written in 1835, which is possibly the date when the last main Malunguinho leader was killed. Now the music from the Jurema celebration in present time has almost taken over, as the silhouettes of Malunguinho's followers tremble on the wall. This game of revealing and concealing the characters' identities is first linked to the lack of historical documentation, but stylistically it appeals to the senses, particularly when the percussion comes to rhyme with the plot suggested by the voice-over, combined with the runaway man and woman. Will they escape? Will Malunguinho take shape and intercede for them?

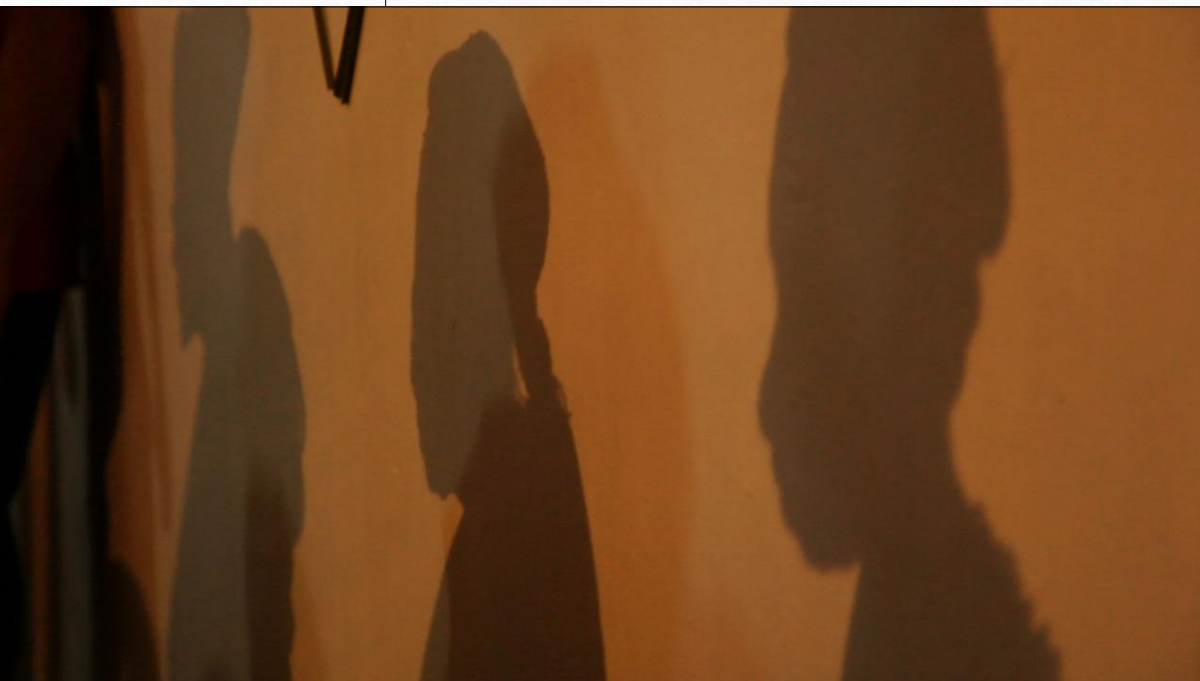


Fig. 2 - Still taken from *Malunguinho*. Led by soaring drums, the Malunguinho's followers perpetuate the traditions.
© Filipe Peres Calheiros.

Interrupted by a shotgun sound, the sequence blends a rainfall stream with a close up of Miró da Muribeca's face in pain at night. The choice to identify the poet is crucial here, as his artistic expression becomes tied up in the percussion-led ritual: "Every day, by noon / Me, my mom and my cousin / Chew up Brazil's history / And become more cultured by the day / Marshals, generals were lost / Each one drowned in our teeth holes / Burning remembrances / At the four

**A RIP
IN TIME:**
Crime and Poetry
in *Malunguinho*

table legs / Every day, by noon” (“Todos os dias, ao meio-dia / Eu, minha mãe, minha prima / Mastigamos a história do Brasil / E cada dia ficamos mais cultos / Perderam-se marechais, generais / Todos morreram afogados no buraco dos nossos dentes / Lembranças ardentes / Aos quatro pés da mesa / Todos os dias, ao meio-dia”). Together with the fire in the background and the rain that slowly ceases, giving way to the growing drums, a black man’s legs standing up suggest some type of religious, Jurema-related embodiment. Miró’s pungent and final verses are then succeeded by the fast-paced drums at a temple full of followers. Only in the last scene does the film reveal a strong black man with a torch in his hand, carefully walking into a pitch-dark forest and never facing the camera. Malunguinho has finally appeared, awakened not only by the cult, but also by a cinematographic process of bringing a story to life. When the poet’s words associate the process of culture formation by a Brazilian history that is chewed up, torn with the teeth and violently swallowed, the use of the archives gains a different perspective. Miró is pointing to the powerfully sad persistence of a historical gap for a black family, one that widens the distance between subjective histories and the official one. The military ranks attest, without regret, to how Malunguinho’s life achievements were recorded as threatening and monstrous acts.



Fig. 3 - Still taken from *Malunguinho* by Peres Calheiros: with the torch in hand, Malunguinho materialises, although briefly, the new archival readings.
© Felipe Peres Calheiros.

**A RIP
IN TIME:**
Crime and Poetry
in *Malunguinho*

The rhythmic appearance of the title character needs no further voicing, since the Jurema drummers and chanters, in their spontaneous collective activity, challenge a tradition built upon the written word. Similarly, the poems that make up the film play with an uncertainty that is no less critical, insofar as its metaphors enhance the complexity of the *quilombolas* and their descendants. Rather than presenting a portrait as victims of an oppressed religious practice, the film decides to use its own metaphorical potentialities (bringing into existence shapes, forms and details such as fire, rain, darkness, brightness, chanting, breathlessness, chopping) as ways to reveal alternatives to a double-charged violence which extinguishes populations and the right to tell stories. Oral practices here take centre stage so we can see certain methods overlapping: the fictionalised scenes following the State archives take us to a chase in the woods. The documental sequences blend with the poet's creation. The shades in between fiction and documentary, history and art, somehow find an original place in restituting sounds and colours for *Malunguinho*. More than re-enacting a story that could only be faithful to the executioner's account, Peres Calheiros opts for a mysterious, if not disturbing imagining about it. A certain hybridisation, as García Canclini (2008) would put it, is at hand in *Malunguinho*. If staging the popular has been a particular trait of Latin American national projects, one might ask why Jurema rituals have been so under-represented in Brazilian artistic production so far, a situation that serves to demonstrate the effectiveness of hybridising cultural practices (poetry and archive, digital and performance) as a survival strategy in an environment that remains aggressive and exclusionary.

The association between literacy and modernisation (García Canclini, 2008) has been so fundamental in shaping Latin American cultures by the elites that the exclusivist written norm, still able to retell histories, is now perceived by some artists as a part of a critical process, a starting point to propose representative temporalities. It is through visibility, as García Canclini notes, that marginal sectors have been able to find new protagonists by staging what is popular. Arguably, what is performative in *Malunguinho*, retrieving oral and musical practices, also finds a cinematographic expression to give name, narrative and affect to Malunguinho's trajectory. However, it is thanks to its digital life on YouTube, where it was uploaded on 19 September 2015, that the film opens up to a very contemporary reception practice. The users' comments celebrate the making of the short, acknowledging the importance of the religious archiving implied in audiovisual form. A reception embedded in online networking makes for a truly hybrid experience, where sharing the video equals spreading the word about Jurema, thus incorporating a telling of history that is

**A RIP
IN TIME:**
Crime and Poetry
in *Malunguinho*

accessible even in so-called illiterate contexts. Although a pedagogical facet is definitely in action, the film's subtleties, particularly the use of poetry, make for a more suggestive than prescriptive work of art. In any case, an overarching criticism to the written establishment is ever more coherent when the concept of spectatorship is also adapted to its time. The audiovisual extravaganza that is often taken as an opposition to literature and traditional assumptions of culture could very well give voice to expressions that cannot be contained in the written domains, as *Malunguinho* demonstrates.

Like the religion of Jurema itself, which syncretised indigenous and African practices, this film honours modes of re-signifying, mutating and tearing apart – something that theorists like Jesús Martín-Barbero and Diana Taylor spotted as possibilities in contemporary art to disrupt the idea of “art with a capital A”. Taylor's work (2012) provides us with good examples on how Latin American performance, sometimes retrieving ancient practices from the native and those who later were forcedly brought to the Americas, deals authentically with the violence of late modernity. In that context, the Internet and new technological devices (Taylor, 2012, p. 98) have been tools of preference for many artists who contest and propose discussions about identity, space, time and body. In that sense, Martín-Barbero's essay on cultural mutations (2010) offers a possible reading on the political effects given an online film reception. The author writes:

La relación del *arte* con las *tecnologías de la información* señala hoy no sólo un modo de divulgación o difusión de estilos y modas, de configuración de públicos y mercantilización de formas, sino un espacio de tensiones fecundas entre residuos y emergencias, entre contemporaneidades y destiempos, un espacio de *desordenamiento cultural*. (Martín-Barbero, 2010, p. 21)

In a digital life following exhibition at festivals, Peres Calheiros' film operates in the aforementioned space of tensions, forging a new time of perception within and outside of fiction: the character that jumps through the centuries to contemporary Recife recalls the strict visibility of the documental life of Jurema, even nowadays, by hegemonic media corporations. Becoming a new item online, which refers to past events from the moment the video is uploaded, *Malunguinho* strives to create future connections, proposes orders and hyperlinks, and re-presents what it means to follow *Malunguinho*. Most of

**A RIP
IN TIME:**
Crime and Poetry
in *Malunguinho*

the videos suggested after the film has played relate to the Jurema tradition, to religions of African descent, or to African music. If that is indicative of a certain persistence of marginalised cultures on the web, works such as *Malunguinho* definitely play a part in *rearranging* what is perceived as Brazilian culture. Moreover, the online environment, despite date-stamping the videos, establishes a space with a theoretically suspended hierarchy, depending on the way the user searches for information. That is not to say advertisement-led suggestions do not emphatically decide what is popular and what is not on YouTube, but the temporal process involved in the appreciation of a film is decisively different than the traditional, festival-theatre circuit. Especially considering the usual span of a short film, the projection it can experience after it is uploaded on the Google platform is immensely wider. Mutating in both form and content into an online art piece, this is what I describe as a process of coming up with notable rips in time. Nevertheless, let us not take this robust creative process as a self-assured solution to contemporary problems, nor as a cold poetic device to find beauty in persecution. Miró da Muribeca's poetry, though understood as the oldest of possibilities to resist, besides music and rituals, does not make the film any less dark, as the worrying situation of such religions both then and now attests, be it for issues of the right to the land of minorities, environmental crises, or plain normalisation of racism in Bolsonaro's Brazil. Serving as background or build-up, the documental fractions, the Jurema temple, and thus Malunguinho's heritage, seem alive for some brief fifteen minutes – the threat is felt, but what burns out, such as the torch's light that fades away, could be either the power of imagining, or the history that killed Malunguinho.

The process of "ripping time" that forms the basis of the perception of the historical character in *Malunguinho* deserves credit for its timeliness. If the political distress affecting minorities observed in recent times in Brazil is the basis of the film's critique, a proposition about time that mixes up a colonial register with popular intervention in the 21st century pierces both a black identity moulded by white perception and the latter's narrative devices, which remain in effect. Impacted by the compression in time described by Stuart Hall in *The Question of Cultural Identity* (1992), affected by globalisation and constituting a considerable blow to the modern and historicised subject and its institutions (such as Pernambuco's Public Archive), *Malunguinho* embraces the disorientating official records to rescue humane traditions that escape that logic. Repetition and persistence, as demonstrated in Miró's poem, and also by the actual documental footage showing the Jurema, render the archive as a contemporary experience – contesting causality by dislocating the characters

**A RIP
IN TIME:**
Crime and Poetry
in *Malunguinho*

from its own time. This artistic endeavour crystallises what film historian and media archaeologist Thomas Elsaesser calls an important spatial turn in history, which directly affects narrative modes and how they are appropriated in postmodern cultures. A broader crisis in historicisation hints at how new (or should we say old?) practices gain prominence to tell modern-day stories. As Elsaesser recalls, the appropriation of archives proposes different logics for understanding the world:

Along with song, poetry, and prayer, narrative has been mankind's privileged storage mode for some 5,000 years, modelling itself on the human experience of time as a succession in sequence, and thus following the logic of the "post-hoc ergo propter hoc", while taking as its dramatic arc (as well as its default value) the life cycle of beginning, middle, and end. But now that archival principles increasingly compete with narratives, other storage modes and methods of access and recall may arise that reduce narrative, also with respect to history, to one special instance of how to render the past both present and intelligible. (Elsaesser, 2016, p. 338)

The film's strong stance regarding the possibilities of history-making through knowledges related to "song, poetry and prayer" thus proves to be more than a response to archival limitation. Narrative and historical modes of telling – accounting for what happened to and who was Malunguinho – are the actual protagonists of Peres Calheiros' film, insofar as the leap of faith demonstrated by Malunguinho's believers is also related to alternatives to institutionalised readings of history. In order to transfer affects and anecdotes associated with the quilombos' resistance, religious chanting and ritual have cultivated this character's attributes that are still relevant to this day. They reinforce the way black peoples can find points of reference in the past, regroup, honour their ancestors, and deal with contemporary struggles. The corrosive poem, which stresses the wounds of slavery in Brazil, when narrated by the same voice who accused of bias in the official records, ensures that the associations between past and present will not go unnoticed when it comes to the suffering inflicted to Malunguinho. There is no sacred instance that simply overturns violence, Miró seems to indicate, but that cathartic effort (the huge fire followed by the rain exemplifies this) enables a critical and emotional response from the audience that would hardly be attainable through the reading of criminal files only.

**A RIP
IN TIME:**
Crime and Poetry
in *Malunguinho*

Another dimension of the use of archives here questions the status of such documentation back in the 19th century: As complaints and exhortations to exterminate the quilombos, do the records promote, prevent, denounce, and revel in the narrated crimes? What Miró's voice-over indicates in a contemporary context is that a simple dislocation from spectatorship might very well create discomfort and detachment from the morality that normalised such writings, but that is not enough to create any real rupture in the racist structures observed in Brazil. As his verses show, the national history that has been shoved down people's throats not only persists, but pervades a spatial and familiar construction, by no stretch confined to history books, printed media and, of course, television. The association of crime and the black population has always been an issue in journalism, with vast news documentation in the post-abolition period in Brazil condoning the criminalisation of vagrancy and loitering for Brazilians of African descent. In the late 20th century, TV programs stole the spotlight to narrate, as spectacle, how crimes happened in the poorer areas of the cities, with ongoing resonance to this day. The relation between crime narratives and their time is subverted in *Malunguinho*, as the threats denounced in written form (accusing the victim!) give way to the retelling of the leader's killing. Without falling into the graphic or glorifying aesthetics to give an account about death, the filmmaker leaves the explicit horrors to the written files (which our imagination is able to capture with critical distance), while grading with sombre colours the possible emergence of new lives after Malunguinho's murder. As much as the short film documents (and this word retrieves the actual public archives) a crime, it purposefully strays away from the spectacle of violence so prevalent in "true crime", understanding well how cultural artifacts work as active, influential constituents of unequal societies.

The violent historicity the film invokes so frankly by the comparison between racist and anti-racist texts could only be transformed through a performative act that dealt with the temporal conundrum – criticising a past that has built a problematic present, and at the same time escaping it. This seeming paradox, or strange pairing of a past-present in aesthetic form, is typical of the art of poetry, as Octavio Paz once wrote:

[The poem] is a complete world in itself, unique, archetypal time, which is no longer past or future but present. And this virtue of being present now forever, by means of which the poem escapes from succession and from history, binds it more inexorably to history. If it is present, it exists only in this here and

now of its presence among men. (Paz, 2009, p. 159)

In a complex composition that recuperates the theatrical experience, but now establishes a filmic archive, the scene in which Miró da Muribeca performs his heartfelt piece is the central point of the short film, less because it gives a *truer* account of Malunguinho, and more for its temporal mechanics that, like Paz posits, play with the presence of the written files while directing our attention to their fissures. As much as causality forms part of the discussion in Miró's poem, its internal logic is not as simple: the fire/water coupling ("drowned"/ "burning") disturbingly incorporates the authorities to the narrator's lost teeth, to his history, to his remembrances. Launching new pasts, as poetry has traditionally played with, the unequivocal instant in which Miró utters each word reminds us of the urgency of a spontaneous act. His impetuous persona does not sound like a document read out aloud, and that devilish machination is what the cinematic, performative archive makes possible before our eyes. Simultaneously plotted and unprompted, cinema has the capacity to discover ghosts while proving they are nothing but make-believe – such adoration for the ephemeral bonds with poetry quite beautifully. When the topic is historical in itself, the meta-play becomes even more evident and subject to the most creative transformations.

It is, indeed, the body-made-present as an act of re-signification of the black experience that three scenes, in particular, reveal as the film's most powerful proposition. Thanks to Miró's recitation, the short's attachment (even if critical) to historical formulation advances in unexpected ways. The unknown man's feet standing up, as well as the late apparition of the man with a torch in his hands, inheriting Malunguinho's boldness through the night, could only have happened after poetry and music, that is, after new modes of feeling history were accessed. Far from ignoring the not-so-well documented tragedies that have afflicted generations of black Brazilians, the film's structure engages in an "archival embodiment" that is neither a substitute for Brazilian documentation nor a festive explanation of alternative resistance. Short-lived like the fire burning behind Miró da Muribeca, like the melancholic rain that shows up for brief moments, the poet's personified words exist to reinvigorate the ritual, to bring Malunguinho to our screens, and are surely aware of its limitations, and of the long journey ahead of us, one that will truly change minds. Yet in no way does *Malunguinho* negate the historical potential to forge new realities. On two levels, the short film invokes the need to deepen our relations to Brazilian history: firstly by documenting cultural practices known to be at risk; and secondly by making its own audiovisual expression a critical

**A RIP
IN TIME:**
Crime and Poetry
in *Malunguinho*

and sensorial counterpart to hard facts. Caught up in an apparent contradiction about the importance of recording the unrecordable and the perseverance of ancient performances, *Malunguinho* sets in motion a much-needed dialogue with the past: merely reconstructing what the archives tell would possibly affirm a timeline that becomes more and more unbearable. Thanks to the film's effort to surround official documents with oral traditions and practices, a mark of profound resilience is left imprinted in the spectator's mind. *Malunguinho*'s killers, who have dictated how dreadful times should be subdued or swept under the rug, are barely in control of the narrative now. If anything, they have crossed centuries to attempt similar violent acts, denying the existence of *quilombolas*; but with the reframing of the tale of Malunguinho's murder, new horizons open. Issues concerning identity, compensation, preservation are suddenly revitalised on artistic and digital grounds. In a way, closer to how the mentioned practices have defied a marginalising conception of history, Peres Calheiros' film proves to be an essential, although distressing, archival envisioning, one to get a glimpse of who Malunguinho *is*, in all the presence this verb could possibly embody.

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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"

OF
CROCODILES AND
LOVE
LETTERS
Colonial Memories
In Portuguese Film

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

OF
CROCODILES AND
LOVE
LETTERS
Colonial Memories
In Portuguese Film

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

OF
CROCODILES AND
LOVE
LETTERS
Colonial Memories
In Portuguese Film

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*

OF
CROCODILES AND
LOVE
LETTERS
Colonial Memories
In Portuguese Film

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

OF
CROCODILES AND
LOVE
LETTERS
Colonial Memories
In Portuguese Film

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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OF
CROCODILES AND
LOVE
LETTERS
Colonial Memories
In Portuguese Film

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.

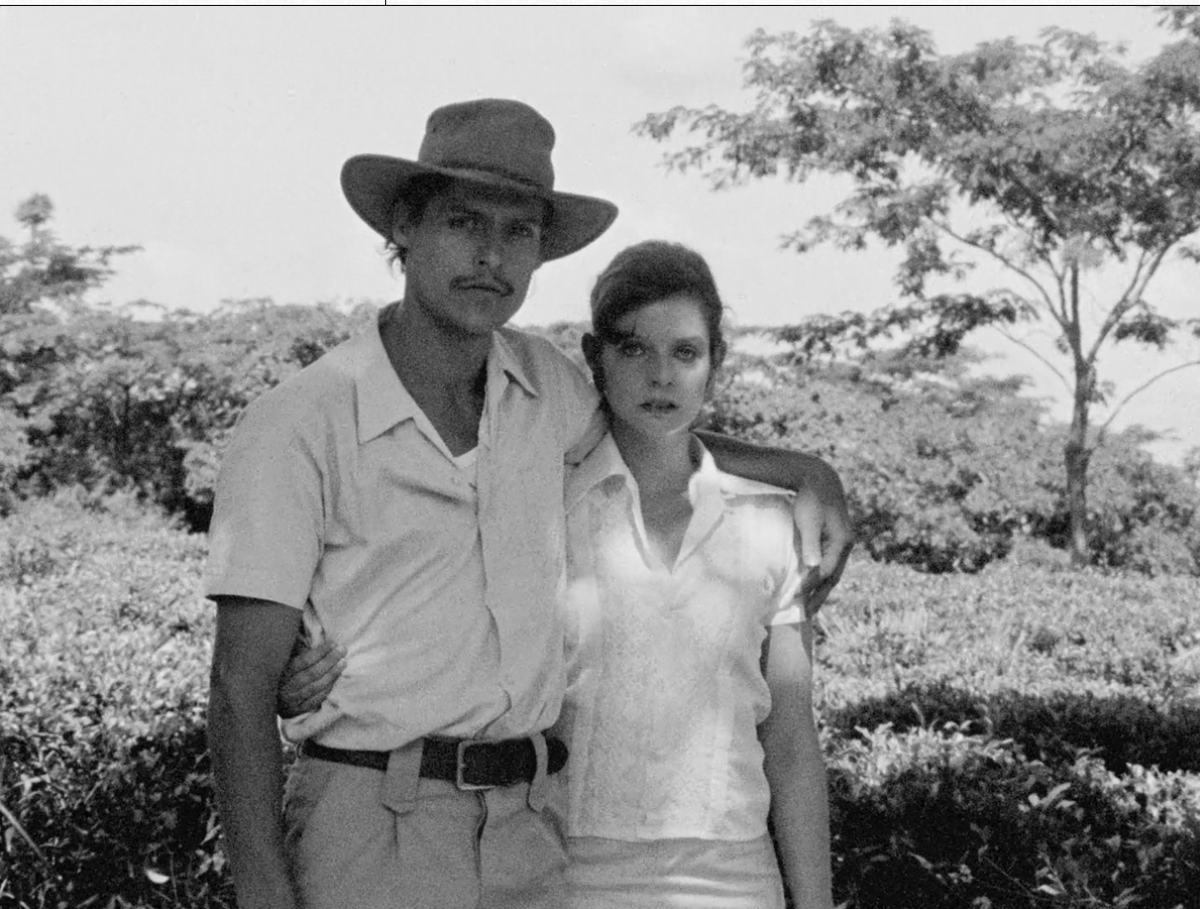


Fig. 1 - Miguel Gomes, *Tabu* (2011). Ventura and Aurora.
© O Som e a Fúria.

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

OF
CROCODILES AND
LOVE
LETTERS
Colonial Memories
In Portuguese Film

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.

OF
CROCODILES AND
LOVE
LETTERS
Colonial Memories
In Portuguese Film

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).

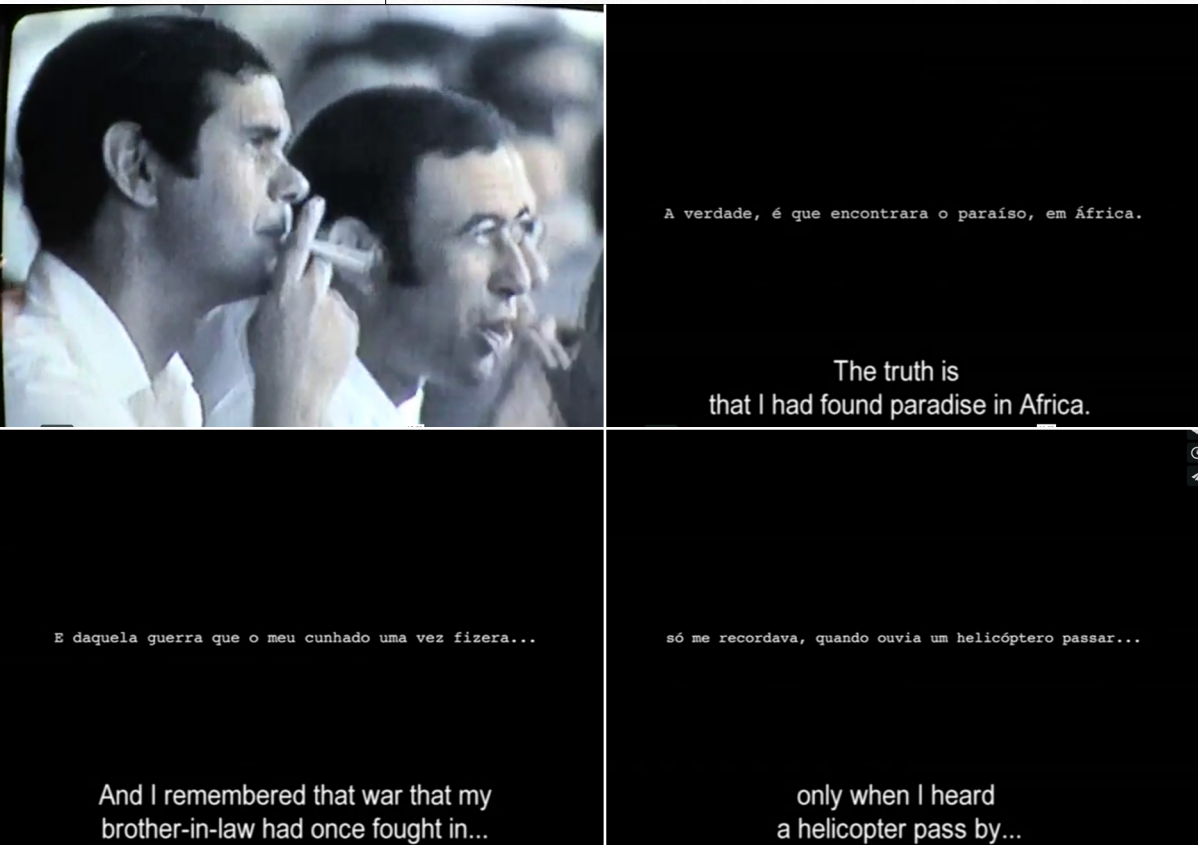
Unlike Miguel Gomes', Ivo Ferreira's *Letters from the War* visualize the hiatus of the forlorn extraterritorial desire of the soldier, the disruptive decoupling from the metropolitan home. This is a film about men and masculinity. About a man, in fact, the genial author Lobo Antunes at his most vulnerable 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

OF
CROCODILES AND
LOVE
LETTERS
Colonial Memories
In Portuguese Film

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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OF
CROCODILES AND
LOVE
LETTERS
Colonial Memories
In Portuguese Film

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THE STRANGE- NESS OF WHAT WE ARE:

Fiona Tan's
Facing Forward

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THE
STRANGENESS
OF WHAT
WE ARE:
Fiona Tan's
Facing Forward

¹ Calvino says in *Invisible Cities* that it was "as if I was writing poems" (Calvino, 1983, p. 37).

² "Articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it 'the way it really was' " (Benjamin, 2003, p. 391). Commenting on this particular thesis, Michael Löwy says: "The thesis begins by rejecting the historicist/positivist conception of history, represented by the famous phrase of Ranke, the conformist and conservative Prussian historian, which sees the task of the historian as being, quite simply, to represent the past 'the way it really was'. The alleged neutral historian, who has access directly to the 'real' facts, in reality only reinforces the view of the victors - the kings, popes and emperors (the preferred object of Ranke's historiography) of all ages" (Löwy, 2005, p. 42).

1. Multiple Meanings

Fiona Tan's *Facing Forward* is an assemblage of archival footage (ethnographic but also touristic) from different places to which the artist adds passages of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, which is a series of strange "poems"¹, "the last love poem addressed to the city" (Calvino, 1983, p. 40).

Facing Forward - what a strange title. Evidently, it relates to a reading of Fiona Tan's piece that we might call metaphorical or allegorical, through which the piece re-enacts the relationship between past, present and future. Facing forward means, therefore, that Fiona Tan "goes to the past", uses archival footage, but does so in order to understand something about the present and future. But also the other way around: it is through the present or the future that she comprehends something about the past. What do "present", "future" and "past" really mean, however? What does it mean to say that Fiona Tan "goes to the past"? It is far from clear to us. Does one need to look at the piece itself, at this strange combination of different archival footage with passages from *Invisible Cities*, in order to fully understand all these words we are using? This is the reading Ernst van Alphen makes of *Facing Forward* (though I clarify we are not taking into account what he says about the relationship Fiona Tan's piece establishes with the ethnographic field:

According to this double recycled historical figure, past, present and future no longer form a linear continuity. *The past is something that can only be reached in the present or the future.* Thus, Tan indicates that the status of places visited in the past is no longer real but by definition imagined. (Alphen, 2005, p. 60 *emphasis added*)

This is the first meaning we can ascribe to the title of Fiona Tan's piece. By using archival footage, she seems to be addressing the past. "The past is something that can only be reached in the present or the future" as van Alphen states, recalling one of Walter Benjamin's theses in *On the Concept of History*, according to which one needs to free oneself from the historicist principle of "the way it really was"². That is, van Alphen seems to be saying that the present is always entangled in the image we make of the past. But at the same time, one needs to free oneself from the link between memory and past:

**THE
STRANGENESS
OF WHAT
WE ARE:**

Fiona Tan's
Facing Forward

³Ernst van Alphen, following Heidegger, reads this relationship of Facing Forward with Ethnography and Anthropology as a question concerning the humanist subject. "Heidegger claims here that when the world was subjected to, or transformed into a picture, in the same visualizing practice 'man' rose up" (Alphen, 2005, p. 58).

Images of faraway worlds, or events that happened long ago, are not placed at distance. On the contrary, images of these worlds and events are represented as passing, as appearing and disappearing in the present. This implies that acts of memory and imagination are no longer seen as directed at opposite directions, the first to the past, the second to the future. They are both seen as «passing images». Memory can even be thought of as taking place in the future, directed toward the present. (Alphen, 2005, p. 49)

Facing forward therefore means that one reaches the past through the present – but one reaches the past in order to understand the present; as two mirrors standing in front of each other, with Fiona Tan in the middle, this relationship is constantly changing, ever evolving. Facing forward then looks to the future, probably to what or who is coming.

But there is probably another meaning. It is not far from this “facing forward” as something that relates to the present – that relates to the one that reaches to the past *in the present* in order to *reach the present* – but it is not coincidental with it. It is something related to a sort of indictment, an order, a command: all those subjects (in a political and scientific sense of the word) are obliged to face forward towards the camera.

It is a known story related to the ethnographic, objectifying gaze. And, of course, one could and should look at Fiona Tan's *Facing Forward* as a deconstruction of the ethnographic gaze and, primarily, as a de-naturalisation of both the cameraman that appears at some point and of the command one almost hears that forces and compels all those bodies we see, all those bodies that are also *facing forward*. Nothing, Fiona Tan's work seems to be saying, is natural here. Everything is staged, forced. Everything is related to power, colonial power, coercion³. This is all evidently true of *Facing Forward*. But it is true of so many films, books and artworks, that it is difficult to identify the difference between Fiona Tan's research and all these other objects in which the ethnographic gaze is called into question.

Let us try a somewhat different approach. Let us presuppose that Fiona Tan doesn't just *use* all that archival footage, but that she reaches to the past and *makes* something out of it. She builds an apparatus where she forces us to look at those bodies that are *facing forward* (towards *us?*), under the weight of a command that builds their image. It is an order, something that seems to pertain to the military field, an imperative: face forward, we hear without

**THE
STRANGENESS
OF WHAT
WE ARE:**

Fiona Tan's
Facing Forward

⁴"Faces and people, mostly looking at the viewer, seem to occasion the deepest and most sustained meditation on her own engagement with the world: the look into the camera initiating an open, dynamic, sometimes disturbing and discomfiting relay of points of address between maker, subject and viewer, each aware of the other's burden in the exchange yet neither able nor required to share this burden in equal measure" (Eiseasser, 2009, p. 31).

⁵Even if Fiona Tan's goal in *Facing Forward* has nothing to do with proper "historical" research (from Walter Benjamin's point of view), we can nevertheless look at the archival footage she uses as a particular type of "quotation". From this perspective, *Facing Forward* could be regarded as a distant relative of Benjamin's third thesis of *On the Concept of History*, seeking to provide a *restitutio ad integrum* of the past. "The chronicler who narrates events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accord with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost to history. Of course only a redeemed mankind is granted the fullness of its past-which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments. Each moment it has lived becomes a citation *à l'ordre du jour*. And that day is Judgment Day" (Benjamin, 2003, p. 390).

⁶"An important theme in Tan's work, for instance, is the relationship between image and (especially cultural) identity. Tan problematizes the fixity of cultural identity. Herself a migrant, she was born in Indonesia, the daughter of a Chinese-Indonesian father and an Australian mother. She spent her childhood and adolescence in Australia but left for Europe at the age of eighteen to study there. She now lives in Amsterdam" (Alphen, 2005, pp. 49-50).

⁷One could also speak of a narrative's unconditional imperative.

hearing, and then we see the order fulfilling itself on those bodies, through them, creating them *for us*. Facing forward thus bears a double motif: while all those bodies are facing forward, while *we* (but who is this "we"?) see all the archival footage, Fiona Tan finds the possibility of an exchange of gazes. One cannot deny this possibility or, to put it somewhat differently, one cannot but deny it, disavowing this exchange of gazes. On the other hand, however, facing forward bears a dissymmetrical and impossible relation: there's no common ground between the gaze and the bodies, no possibility of exchange.

This dissymmetrical relation can be translated to the apparatus Fiona Tan builds. We started by showing this movement that captures both present and past, that places them in front of each other (facing forward towards each other, which also means *exposed* to one another). But this relation she is able to establish through research in the archive under no circumstances establishes any kind of equality. It's always through a strangeness, through a dissymmetrical relationship, that *Facing Forward* builds a link between the past, the present and the future⁴ (Fiona Tan quotes Calvino, "the foreignness of what you no longer are" (Calvino, 1974, p. 29), in order to reveal this impossible identity).⁵

2. Imaginary Pasts

One of the most important aspects of Fiona Tan's work is what we could call a "migrant condition",^{6,7} something that bears a relationship to time and images – a *distance* regarding images and time which is also the possibility of re-appropriating both, with all the dangers that all those imaginary homelands imply. It's an *uncertain* memory of a particular history, full of gaps and voids. Fiona Tan, born in Indonesia, an immigrant herself (irrespective of legal status) that looks at all those strange images as if they were ciphers of something that she could call her own. The distance comes exactly from this relationship she bears, that she, as so many others, carries within her, bearing a history which is hers but also a history that she cannot make her own. Those images say something to her, they call and question her (a question without answer, as a void which nothing can fulfil). These images and archival footage *are her* in a way one could only wonder, but at the same time they cannot imply any kind of identity or identification. This archival footage, even if saying something to and about her, remains always foreign, strange, close and yet distant.

We can then imagine the almost impossible situation of the particular

THE
STRANGENESS
OF WHAT
WE ARE:
Fiona Tan's
Facing Forward

and strange apparatus Fiona Tan builds starting from – but also starting with – Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. This impossible situation, the dream that both Tan and Calvino dream, is quite simply stated, and one wonders about the infinite possibilities that can and should arise from it: the immigrant comes, this other *comes* from far away, from a distance no one can erase – that one cannot but erase from the moment he arrives. This other who comes tells a story, several stories. He stages an impossible replacement, switching places with the host, telling him his own story, carrying with him the relationship the host has with himself, re-appropriating the images.

And is this indeed not what happens in Calvino's *Invisible Cities*? Marco Polo is the one who always arrives, the foreigner who starts by not knowing the language, forced to speak through mimicry and objects. But it is this foreigner who speaks to the Great Khan of *his own* empire. It is he, the one who is always coming, who never ceases to arrive, who tells Khan the story that Khan tells himself.

The ambassadors were Persians, Armenians, Syrians, Copts, Turkomans; the emperor is he who is a foreigner to each of his subjects, and only through foreign eyes and ears could the empire manifest its existence to Kublai. In languages incomprehensible to the Khan, the envoys related information heard in languages incomprehensible to them: from this opaque, dense stridor emerged the revenues received by the imperial treasury, the first and last names of officials dismissed and decapitated, the dimensions of the canals that the narrow rivers fed in times of drought. But when the young Venetian made his report, a different communication was established between him and the emperor. Newly arrived and totally ignorant of the Levantine languages, Marco Polo could express himself only with gestures, leaps, cries of wonder and of horror, animal barkings or hootings, or with objects he took from his knapsacks - ostrich plumes, pea-shooters, quartzes - which he arranged in front of him like chessmen. (Calvino, 1974, p. 21)

One can always imagine Fiona Tan, the migrant, the one who arrives, the newcomer, claiming to be the rightful heir to all that archival footage, the one who holds their secret.

As in Calvino's *Invisible Cities* then, the dissymmetrical relationship

**THE
STRANGENESS
OF WHAT
WE ARE:**

Fiona Tan's
Facing Forward

⁸“Obviously, the speaking position in Tan’s piece is entirely different from that of the original film. Being herself of Chinese-Indonesian-Australian descent and having lived in Europe for most of her life, Tan speaks from the position of the migrant. Moreover, she is speaking from the position of the artist, who takes the freedom to rearrange images and texts in a form that deliberately avoids a unified perspective on the archival material, and that underscores her personal involvement in the interpretation of it” (Noordegraaf, 2008, p. 325).

between the emperor and the foreigner is ironically inverted. The foreigner arrives and interrupts a speech (the one the emperor delivers to itself, assuring himself of himself), inserts a distance in the images themselves⁸ and, more importantly, claims that it is he, the migrant, that tells the story – but a story in which he is simultaneously close and distant, a story which is his but to which he is also always already foreign. All those bodies: close and yet coming from so far away (in a double sense).

We can claim that the use of archival footage by Fiona Tan involves her displacing their meaning and epistemological setting, their debt to a particular 19th-century configuration of anthropology and ethnography. And we can argue, of course, that *Facing Forward* is one way of questioning the objectifying gaze of both disciplines. However, if this can be true of *Facing forward* it is also true of other artistic gestures by Fiona Tan and other artists, and it misses the narrative dimension of *Facing Forward*.

The first archival footage of *Facing Forward* is from a group formed by coloniser and colonised (the colonisers, of course, in the centre). Yet after the touristic and more ethnographic footage, the same group, the same film, appears again and closes *Facing Forward*, as a return to the beginning. There is, then, this circular logic, which could be interpreted as a sort of sameness that pervades all types of footage featured (which are equal in the power relations they reveal). Interrupting this circularity, or, to put it differently, making it eccentric, impossibly bringing something to the past, we come across passages from Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*. By embracing a device that could be a narrative element, it is as if *Facing Forward* was itself a sort of story, an album, that Fiona Tan, a migrant just like Marco Polo, shows to the Khan. But it is a non-family album, the reverse of any kind of familiarity or kinship, with Tan showing Khan all those strange and foreign bodies “objects (s)he took from his knapsacks – ostrich plumes, pea-shooters, quartzes-which (s)he arranged in front of him like chessmen”.

Let us look at the passages Fiona Tan chose from *Invisible Cities*. It is interesting to emphasise, first, the double function Calvino’s book has in *Facing Forward*: on the one hand it gives those images a kind of reflexive dimension, as if they were able to think themselves as images from the past; but at the same time this discourse coming from elsewhere takes these images to somewhere else, giving them a sense of strangeness that is actually theirs, as if the exotic, which was their discursive realm, was replaced by the strange, the uncanny, the foreign.

It is also worth mentioning the intervention Tan does in Calvino’s text. It

**THE
STRANGENESS
OF WHAT
WE ARE:**

Fiona Tan's
Facing Forward

⁹The translation was changed in order to respect the text Tan reads in *Facing Forward*. However, the imaginary dimension of the dialogue in William Weaver's translation of *Invisible Cities* is straightforward: "Marco Polo imagined answering (or Kublai Khan imagined his answer)": "At this point Kublai Khan interrupted him or imagined interrupting him or Marco Polo imagined himself interrupted."; "All this so that Marco Polo could explain or imagine explaining or he imagined explaining or succeed finally in explaining to himself". As we can see, the dialogue is suspended, interrupted, through this ambiguity.

¹⁰"and he retraced the stages of his journeys, and he came to know the port from which he had set sail, and the familiar places of his youth, and the surroundings of home, and a little square of Venice where he gamboled as a child" (Calvino, 1974, p. 28).

goes without saying that every choice is based on some reasoning (meaning the choices Tan makes have significance and do something to the images), but what is interesting is the erasure of the indecision present in Calvino's text. Indeed, the dialogue that Tan quotes remains, in Calvino's book, quite ambiguous. One does not know, reading the beginning of the second chapter (or, perhaps, the second series, given Calvino's taste for this serial aspect) if Khan's and Marco Polo's dialogue has actually taken place, or if it happened only in one of their minds. Ultimately, one does not know, and it is impossible to determine *who* is speaking in this introduction to the second chapter:

Possibly, in a conversation with Kublai Khan, Marco Polo said that the more one was lost in unfamiliar quarters of distant cities the more he understood the other cities he had crossed to arrive there. At this point Kublai Khan interrupted him to ask: "You advance always with your head turned back?", "Is what you see always behind you?", "Does your journey take place only in the Past?" And Marco Polo explained that what he sought was always something lying ahead, even if it was a matter of the past. Arriving at each new city, the traveller finds again a past of his that he did not know he had: the foreignness of what you no longer are or no longer possess lies in wait for you in foreign, unpossessed places. Marco enters a city; he sees someone in a square living a life or an instant that could be his; he could now be in that Man's place, if he had stopped in time, long ago; or if, long ago, at a crossroads, instead of taking one road he had taken the opposite one." (Calvino, 1974, pp. 28-29)⁹

This quotation, the first appearing in *Facing Forward*, is added to the footage of unknown and unfamiliar streets – the most interest being the attention given by passers-by to the camera, pointing out the *foreignness* of film and its technical apparatus.

Beyond the relationship between Calvino's text and the archival images, what seems appealing is this comprehension of the past and its relationship with the present and future that Fiona *adds* to the images. It is an addition but at the same time a subtraction, given that the relation the image has with itself, a relation that is not external to the discursive fields of certain disciplines, is disturbed by this idea that the past is a matter of possibility.

Indeed, in one of the parts that Fiona Tan decided not to add¹⁰, Marco

**THE
STRANGENESS
OF WHAT
WE ARE:**

Fiona Tan's
Facing Forward

¹¹ "because the traveller's past changes according to the route he has followed. Not the immediate past, that is, to which each day that goes by adds a day, but the more remote past" (Calvino, 1974, p. 28).

Polo speaks of Venice, that is, of his past, as one of the ciphers that allows us to read the cities he visited. It is a Proustian motif: all those places he visited, all those strange and unknown locations he came to see, are reminiscences of the "little square of Venice where he gambled as a child" – and it is this image that keeps returning, circularly but also differently, in all the cities.

This is the first idea, one which we already encountered: this journey into the past is nothing more than the possibility of seizing the present and the future, given that the true image of the past – Marco Polo's "little square of Venice" – is always lying ahead.¹¹

But at the same time as Calvino's text makes it possible to speak about a true image of the past, it opens it up to countless possibilities. The past is no longer something that happened but all those myriad of unfulfilled possibilities ("a past of his that he did not know he had"), all those lives that Marco Polo *could have lived*, but didn't.

The second quote from Calvino's *Invisible Cities* is much more sombre. It appears at the end of *Facing Forward*, when the group footage comes back once again, as if to close the journey, to close the narrative.

*By now, from that real or hypothetical past of his, he is excluded, he cannot stop; he must go on to another city, where another of his pasts awaits him, or something perhaps that had been a possible future of his and is now someone else's present. «Journeys to relive your past?» was the Khan's question at this point, a question which could also have been formulated: «journeys to recover your future?» And Marco's answer was: "Elsewhere is a negative mirror. The traveller recognizes the little that is his. Discovering the much he has not had and will never have". (Calvino, 1974, p. 29, *emphasis added*)*

The first quote opens to the possibility of a real image of the past. This past is never fully captured, is always fading away, disappearing on the horizon (in a promised future). More than the pasts reification or its objectivation, more than the knowledge one could obtain from all the archival footage – from all archival material, one could add –, this true image of the past is a nostalgic reminiscence of a never realised possibility, the beginning of narrative.

There is some irony in adding this point of view to ethnographic and anthropologic footage that actually accomplishes the exact opposite, the reification and objectivation of bodies and cultures – an irony that contradicts

**THE
STRANGENESS
OF WHAT
WE ARE:**

Fiona Tan's
Facing Forward

¹² "This explains why Tan's use of archival footage of an ethnographic and colonial nature is effective in its exposure of the history of the humanist subject. This kind of footage is paradigmatic for the notion of the image she wants to challenge and complicate" (Alphen, 2005, p. 59).

¹³ There's a danger hidden in the apparatus Tan builds. What could prevent us from reading *Facing Forward* as a humanistic rhetorical device, one in which we are invited to imagine ourselves in the image we see?

any kind of nostalgic relation towards the past. One could say, as Van Alphen claims for example¹², that *Facing Forward* is a deconstruction of a universal, European subject. But as we have already seen, Tan's work seems to be more interested in *interrupting* a certain discourse, a discourse that those images have with themselves¹³ – the goal being to become strangers to themselves and to us, the same way that the cities in Calvino's book remain strangers to Marco Polo, even if they ultimately lead to a search for his past.

What we would like to highlight, however, is a sort of third movement, beyond the idea that the past resides in the present or the future and, secondly, this reference to a true image that keeps coming back – but always differently, as a singular and particular variation, as something that exists only as a variation, as the "little square of Venice" that appears transfigured in a faraway city. This third movement could be condensed in the following sentence by Calvino: "elsewhere is a negative mirror". Or, to put it differently: one is excluded from the past.

It is a melancholic and sombre conclusion that closes *Facing Forward* and follows from a "migrant condition" that Fiona Tan's film builds. Jacques Derrida calls this lack or this absence a "disorder of identity". The "migrant condition", excluded as it is from any past, is also a search, a pulsion, anything but "a surfeit or richness of identities, attributes, or names" (Derrida, 1998, p. 14). Tan looks at those images she collected in the archive. They are always already ciphered images that must be interrogated in light of their uncanniness: are they from our past? Is that my great-grandfather? Doesn't that street carry with it as a tread, a trace without any original, the "little square of Venice"? Less an actual place than a crossing of all places, whether real or imaginary, past or present?

Does this "disorder of identity" favor or inhibit anamnesia? Does it heighten the desire of memory, or does it drive the genealogical fantasy to despair? Does it suppress, repress, or liberate? All of these at the same time, no doubt (...) (Derrida, 1998, p. 18)

Facing Forward is this "desire of memory", but does it entail a despair? Or does it liberate itself from history? Both, probably, as Derrida argued.

Concerning this "desire of memory" that we see in Fiona Tan's *Facing Forward*, one should also hear in it the "disorder of identity" of which Derrida speaks. It is a lack, an absence, a void one needs to fill (as Marco Polo does in Calvino's book, always filling in the gaps of memory), a disorder that captures

**THE
STRANGENESS
OF WHAT
WE ARE:**

Fiona Tan's
Facing Forward

¹⁴William Weaver translated the Italian term "l'estraneità" as "foreignness". We prefer the term "strangeness", even if the meaning of "l'estraneità" that Calvino uses is much closer to the known English "uncanniness", a term whose meaning Freud questioned.

images and words, a "destinerrance" to quote another of Derrida's concepts.

This abiding "alienation" appears, like "lack," to be constitutive. But it is neither a lack nor an alienation; it lacks nothing that precedes or follows it, it alienates no ipseity, no property, and no self that has ever been able to represent its watchful eye. Although this injunction issues a summons, lastingly, nothing else "is there" ever to watch over its past or future. (Derrida, 1998, p. 25)

This "disorder of identity", this constitutive lack which can also mean a particular despair – and one could imagine Fiona Tan showing these images to Khan, trying to explain them. What seems interesting in this "alienation without alienation" (Derrida, 1998, p. 25) is that it appears in *Facing Forward* as the "birth" of narrative. Exactly because the alienation "alienates no ipseity, no property, and no self", because, therefore, there is no narrative that could restore the true image of the past, *Facing Forward* needs to gather all those different (and strange, uncanny, but not exotic) images, playing with them with some despair. Showing them to the Khan, without any words, as a singular and particular fold of history. Showing to the Khan the "strangeness of what you no longer are".¹⁴

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BETWEEN MARXISM AND POSTMOD- ERNISM:

'Cultural Revolution' and the Sino-Soviet Split as Entertainment in Jean-Luc Godard's *La Chinoise* (1967)

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**BETWEEN
MARXISM
AND
POSTMOD-
ERNISM:**

'Cultural Revolution'
and the Sino-Soviet Split
as Entertainment in
Jean-Luc Godard's
La Chinoise (1967).

1. Introduction

Film/Intellectual History/Popular Geopolitics

Jean-Luc Godard's much debated, often maligned and occasionally revered *La Chinoise* (1967) functions – at least in retrospect – as a sublime reflection on the history of political theory and the history of art – to say nothing of the history of so called 'political art'. Indeed, few works in the history of cinema can be said to have reflected so clearly the shifting intellectual trends of the time as well as the stylistic 'revolution' which was simultaneously emerging through various new experimental forms of visual representation (Conceptualism, Pop Art, *Nouveau réalisme*, etc).

The film revolves around a handful of central characters (Veronique, Guillaume, Yvonne, Henri, Kirilov, and Omar) who make up the members of a group of radicalised students under the influence of the Maoist politics increasingly gaining ground at the suburban University of Nanterre. They spend the summer in a Paris apartment owned by Veronique's parents where they quote from Chairman Mao's Little Red Book and give each other lectures on Marxism-Leninism whilst drinking Pepsi Cola, painting, doing aerobics, and playing with toy guns. The film's climax sees the group plan to assassinate the Soviet Minister of Culture on a scheduled visit to Paris that summer.

This article seeks to draw on the idea of films as cultural artefacts which can represent 'political theory', and which can also serve as the reflection of a particular historical 'moment' (Shapiro, 2020) whilst, at the same time, conceptualising a 'popular geopolitics' (Dodds, 2007) for a mass audience. It will be suggested that Jean-Luc Godard's 1967 film, *La Chinoise*, compellingly (if comically) captures the evolution of Marxist theory in the West as well as its ostensible practice in the East through its fascination with, and treatment of, the 'Cultural Revolution' (1966–1976) in Maoist China and through its provocative posing of grand theoretical questions (on utopia, on violence, on human agency) through radical cinematic techniques involving a subversive use of language, colour, and sound.

Of course, as with most early (pre-1968) Godard films, many have commented on the film and its significant cultural influence. Subsequent biographers of the director have confusingly viewed the film as both 'unorthodox' (MacCabe, 2003, p. 197) and "alarmingly naïve" (Dixon, 1997, p. 81), acknowledging how it both embraced the absurd and farcical in its treatment of the characters of the young students (Dixon, 1997; Morrey, 2005) but also – along with *Week-end* (1967) – simultaneously marked "a radical ideological

**BETWEEN
MARXISM
AND
POSTMOD-
ERNISM:**

'Cultural Revolution'
and the Sino-Soviet Split
as Entertainment in
Jean-Luc Godard's
La Chinoise (1967).

turn" (Brody, p. 301) for the director. The film has also been recognised for its perceived 'prophecy' of the events to come the following year (Dixon, 1997; Brody, 2008) in May 1968.

Godard's attitude at the time can be discerned from the press release for the film in which the director bombastically proclaimed:

Fifty years after the October Revolution, the American industry rules cinema the world over. There is nothing much to add to this statement of fact. Except that on our own modest level we too should provoke two or three Vietnams in the bosom of the vast Hollywood-Cinecittà-Mosfilm-Pinewood-etc. empire, and, both economically and aesthetically, struggling on two fronts as it were, create cinemas which are national, free, brotherly, comradely, and bonded in friendship. (Milne, 1986, p. 243)

This statement is particularly revealing as it contains many of the essential themes which seemed to fascinate Godard during this period. Firstly, the declared interest in 'revolution' – specifically with reference to the 'Cultural Revolution' (1966 – 1976) in the People's Republic of China (PRC) – which was garnering considerable influence among Western intellectuals and students at the time. Secondly, the spectre of violence which ultimately hovers over all debates of this kind and which was particularly prescient at the time with the ongoing war in Vietnam and, in retrospect, with both the student riots of May 1968 and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in the same year. Certainly, in retrospect, the film seemed rather prophetic, especially with respect to the events of May '68, which Godard's film would appear to have predicted with some accuracy. Indeed, in many ways, *La Chinoise* serves as a discussion of violence and the limits of revolutionary thought, especially when framed within the context of the developed world as Colin MacCabe (2003, p. 198) has already pointed out. Finally, the reference to the creation of "cinemas which are national, free, brotherly, comradely, and bonded in friendship" (Milne, p. 243) reminds us of the language of solidarity common to left-wing discourse at the time, as well as the type of description one may associate with subsequent developments in so-called 'postcolonial theory' and the spike in interest in the 'third world' which emerged in the late 1960s alongside the gradual process of decolonisation.

In retrospect at least, it seems fair to recognise that *La Chinoise* offers a prescient reflection on the contemporaneous development of events at the

**BETWEEN
MARXISM
AND
POSTMOD-
ERNISM:**

'Cultural Revolution'
and the Sino-Soviet Split
as Entertainment in
Jean-Luc Godard's
La Chinoise (1967).

time. Moreover, in terms of the 'geopolitical imagination', the growing interest in the 'third world', as mentioned above, marked by intellectuals on the left in Paris in the wake of the colonial wars in Algeria, Vietnam and Cuba, is on clear display in the film's very title. Whilst the growing interest in China amongst French intellectuals at the time – represented by everyone from Jean-Paul Sartre to Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes – seems to have been extremely significant, put in the most simplistic terms, following the death of Stalin and the revelations about the repression under his command in 1956 as well as the events which saw the brutal crushing of the Hungarian uprising at the hand of the Soviet Union (USSR) (also in 1956), China seemed to offer new hope for 'revolution'. In retrospect, this, of course, rings completely naïve – given the brutal violence of the period – but the power and influence of Maoism on late 1960s French intellectual life should not be overlooked. Indeed, as Richard Wolin (2010) has pointed out:

within a brief span of time, nearly the entire Parisian intelligentsia became intoxicated with and fascinated by Maoism. Among writers, artists, and intellectuals, Maoism had become radical chic – the political fashion du jour. (p. 203)

Secondly, the film in many ways can be seen to represent the contemporaneous shifts in Marxist theory itself as it reflects debates taking place within orthodox Marxism at the time. The late 1960s marked a period of flux for Marxist theory as many other radical currents of thought (situationist, anarchist, Maoist, poststructuralist, etc.) were developing either alongside or *within* the Marxist tradition. The Western world was simultaneously witnessing the unbridled expansion of an urban consumer society (automobiles, supermarkets, fashion) and the violent excesses of the ongoing process of decolonisation (Algeria, Vietnam, Cuba). It was into this dynamic socio-political context that *La Chinoise* was released in the late summer of 1967.

**BETWEEN
MARXISM
AND
POSTMOD-
ERNISM:**

'Cultural Revolution'
and the Sino-Soviet Split
as Entertainment in
Jean-Luc Godard's
La Chinoise (1967).

2. Postmodernism and the Crisis of Marxism

2.1. Postmodernism

That the origins of 'postmodernism' can be observed in the late 1960s or early-to-mid 1970s is a relatively common point of consensus shared by a range of scholars on the subject (Jameson, 1991, 1998; Anderson, 1998; Harvey, 1990; Callinicos, 1990; Connor, 1991; Butler, 2002). Yet the concept of 'postmodernism' is as problematic as it is ambiguous and potentially all-encompassing. By the 1990s (at the height of its popularity as a concept), the term was being used to describe new forms in everything from architecture to cinema and from philosophy to literature; yet, despite the plurality of meaning behind the term (indeed 'plurality' is central to almost all theorisations of the concept), there is considerable consensus around many of its central tenets.

Although the term has lost some of its intellectual potency in the current era, it is, as its prefix hints, generally understood to represent a reaction to, or complete rejection of, 'modernism' – the movement in philosophy and the arts which characterised many of the ground-breaking ideas and various avant-gardes of the late 19th century and earlier 20th century. As a rejection of the latter, then, postmodernism accordingly embraces the ambiguous, questions 'truth', and is marked by a profound scepticism towards any concepts of universality, which it inevitably views as 'totalising' and ontologically flawed (for ideas about 'truth' and 'progress' inhabit so much of the modernist movement).

The concept of the 'postmodern' and many of its associated symptoms are generally understood to have evolved out of the work of French thinkers Jean-François Lyotard (1979/1984) and Jean Baudrillard (1983) – the latter taking considerable inspiration from the earlier work of Guy Debord (1967/2012) – in which an "incredulity towards metanarratives" (Lyotard, 1979) and a distrust of representing 'reality' were respectively developed. As a result, the postmodern is marked by an intense self-reflexivity, constantly conscious of its own inability to properly 'represent' anything at all. As Linda Hutcheon (2002) has put it:

In general terms, [postmodernism] takes the form of self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining content. It is rather like saying something whilst at the same time putting inverted commas around what is being said.... Postmodernism's distinctive character lies in this kind of wholesale 'nudging' commitment to doubleness, or duplicity. (p.1)

**BETWEEN
MARXISM
AND
POSTMOD-
ERNISM:**

'Cultural Revolution'
and the Sino-Soviet Split
as Entertainment in
Jean-Luc Godard's
La Chinoise (1967).

Such “self-contradictory” content and “commitment to duplicity” (ibid.) is clearly visible in *La Chinoise* through the film’s simultaneous promotion *and* critique of a radical politics – typified by the film’s remarkable train journey sequence in which Veronique (Anne Wiazemsky) and her lecturer (and real-life philosopher) Francis Jeanson discuss the problem of political violence. As the audience, we may oscillate between feeling sympathy for the characters – or at least recognising some sincerity in Godard’s choice of subject-matter – whilst, at the same time, subjecting them to complete ridicule as we watch them quote Marx whilst performing aerobics on the balcony. For *La Chinoise* is somehow Godard at his most revolutionary *and* farcical, as we are presented with discussions on class struggle and political terrorism all set to the soundtrack of a pop song about Chairman Mao and interspersed with images of comic strips and absurd pantomime set-pieces involving toy guns and cheap, multi-coloured sunglasses. These are the fundamental contradictions which make the film such an interesting object of analysis and which illustrate its undeniable embodiment of a postmodern philosophy, or, rather, *anti-philosophy*.

In addition to this (un)ambiguous ‘duplicity’, however, the postmodern is often understood to be most notable for its unprecedented merging of the formerly disparate fields of ‘culture’ and ‘economics’. Indeed, to quote Fredric Jameson’s (1991) crude formulation, postmodernism is the “cultural logic of late capitalism” which suffers from a ‘crisis in historicity’ (p. 25) – an inability to authentically represent the past – as well as “an allergy to depth” (Eagleton, 2004, p. 191), which plays (around) with the purely ‘superficial’ in an endless game of imitation or ‘pastiche’ (Jameson, 1991).

Visually, this aspect of the postmodern – a playful emphasis on the superficial appearance of things – is perhaps best captured by the emergence of both *nouveau réalisme* in France and by Pop Art in the US and elsewhere in the 1960s. Pop Art, in particular, has become synonymous with understandings of postmodernism – given its interest in imitation, the surface of things, and its complicity with consumer society – and this relationship has been convincingly sketched out (Harrison, 2001). Its overlap with the colourful composition of Godard’s films of this period (1965 – 1967), however, is beyond doubt. Indeed, it has been said that *La Chinoise* “makes revolution glamorous, a pop event” (Dixon, 1997, p. 83), for despite the film’s radical political content, *La Chinoise* ultimately embodies a pop-kitsch form more reminiscent of Lichtenstein than Lenin. In fact, interestingly, one Franco-Greek film critic (Katsahnias, 1990, p. 118, as cited in, Morrey, 2005, p. 55) once remarked that, in retrospect, the film should perhaps best be considered as “a comedy about the relationship between

**BETWEEN
MARXISM
AND
POSTMOD-
ERNISM:**

'Cultural Revolution'
and the Sino-Soviet Split
as Entertainment in
Jean-Luc Godard's
La Chinoise (1967).

fashion and ideology". Here we are reminded of the curious interconnection between fashion and politics which also seems to capture in some way an aspect of the *folie* of 'the Sixties' and which was subsequently immortalised in Tom Wolfe's (1970) humorous coinage of the term 'radical chic'.

2.2. The Crisis of Marxism

Returning for a moment to the origins of postmodernism, however, and in particular to the political or ideological context of its conception, we can recognise that considerable critical consensus identifies postmodernism as having emerged out of, or in direct reaction to, Marxist theory, particularly the tradition of so-called 'Western Marxism' (Anderson, 1979). As Terry Eagleton (2004) has so eloquently described:

The crisis of Marxism did not begin with the crumbling of the Berlin Wall. It could be felt at the very heart of the political radicalism of the late 60s and early 70s. Not only that, but it was to a large extent the driving force behind the cascade of provocative new ideas. When Lyotard rejected what he called grand narratives, he first used the term to mean, simply, Marxism. (p. 38)

Something akin to this ostensible paradox is what drives the interest of my research in general and in this paper in particular; that is, how to make sense of the counterintuitive observation that the 'postmodern' – with all its conservative implications which can still be felt today – could have emerged at the very same moment as the revolutionary spirit which typified the late 1960s in France and elsewhere.

Indeed, that postmodernism emerged out of a 'crisis of Marxism' is implicit, if not wholly explicit, in the work of several important theorists (Jameson, 1991, 1998; Anderson, 1998; Harvey, 1990; Callinicos, 1990; Norris, 1990; Connor, 1991, McRobbie, 1994), and it is from this point of departure that our discussion of Godard's *La Chinoise* stems. For the film was not only produced and released at the very moment of postmodernism's theorised conception, but focuses precisely on the decomposition of Marxist theory itself, thus serving as an excellent object through which to (re)conceptualise this historical 'moment' (Shapiro, 2020) and its visual representation.

It is interesting to note that, although some of Godard's films have been

**BETWEEN
MARXISM
AND
POSTMOD-
ERNISM:**

'Cultural Revolution'
and the Sino-Soviet Split
as Entertainment in
Jean-Luc Godard's
La Chinoise (1967).

considered examples of a 'postmodern' cinema (Butler, 2012, p. 123; Morrey, 2005, p. 172 – 186; Jameson, 1998, p. 1), it is almost always the director's later work (post-1980?) which is regarded in such light and rarely, if ever, his earlier (pre-1968) work. The latter, instead, is usually viewed as somehow *modernist* in character, perhaps due to its association with the French New Wave and the politics of the *auteur*, something which Fredric Jameson (2007) has himself associated with modernism in his own writing on cinema. This is yet another reason then, if any more were needed, to revisit a film like *La Chinoise*, which almost seems to find itself *sandwiched* between the 'modern' and the 'postmodern', as it were, both in terms of its historicisation but also its content and form. That the film can then also be seen to reflect the evolution of art and ideas in its own content (discussions of Marxism, commentary of events in PRC) and form (colour, composition, and narrative structure) demands that the film be (re)examined further.

3. 1967: A 'Cultural Revolution' in China and within the 'European Left'?

3.1. 'Cultural Revolution' in the PRC

The so-called 'Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution' – now understood to be one of the most tragic and deadliest episodes in 20th century history – had begun in the PRC under the command of Chairman Mao in 1966 and although exact details of events were not always crystal clear outside the country, by the following year, the 'Cultural Revolution' was the talk of many the world over. Nowhere was it more of a talking point than on the Left Bank in Paris and on the suburban campus of the University of Nanterre. And, as Wolin (2010) has interestingly argued:

it seemed that the less information the students possessed concerning the People's Republic and the greater China's geographic and cultural remove from Europe, the more leeway they had to project their own utopian hopes and dreams. (p. 125)

This observation helps us to make sense of the phenomenon of 'Maoism' in parts of the developed world, where it was often perceived as something quite

**BETWEEN
MARXISM
AND
POSTMOD-
ERNISM:**

'Cultural Revolution'
and the Sino-Soviet Split
as Entertainment in
Jean-Luc Godard's
La Chinoise (1967).

different from what it was in China, as Julia Lovell (2019) has also documented with considerable detail. Like the characters in Godard's film, then, the students and young radicals of the time were as much using their own imaginations as they were drawing on the facts of events in the PRC. 'Maoism' and the 'Cultural Revolution' became symbolic vessels into which they could pour their own abstract utopianism and disappointment with the USSR. Although the characters are seen listening to 'Radio Peking' throughout the film in an apartment filled with hundreds of copies of Chairman Mao's Little Red Book, and although the walls of the apartment are filled with images of the 'Great Helmsman' and newspaper cut-outs of reports concerning events in the PRC, the group's activities are clearly far removed from any reality of the Cultural Revolution in China.

Indeed, it is interesting to note that, according to Chinese historian, Yang Jisheng (2021), it was precisely in August 1967 – the exact moment in which *La Chinoise* was released in cinemas in France – that Mao "lost control" of the Cultural Revolution and this, in turn, led him "to abandon some of [its] staunchest supporters" (2021, p. xxi) as ongoing events began to take an unpredictable and unmanageable turn for the authorities in Beijing. So, by the time the film was to be viewed in France, and in other parts of Europe, Mao's own policies in the PRC were already moving in unexpected directions. What would the film's protagonists, who hurled accusations of 'revisionism' at anyone who dared question their own perceived 'Maoism', have made of this 'revision' from within Mao's government itself? The answer, of course, is that it does not matter because few see the characters in the film as sincere despite their declarations to the contrary – Guillaume (Jean-Pierre Léaud): "sincerity is needed as well as violence!" Indeed, for Wolin (2010), the Maoist "intoxication" drifting through France at the time was as much a question of being 'fashionable' as anything deeply political, and Godard's *La Chinoise* was merely "an alternately whimsical and propagandistic attempt to fathom the wave of Sinophilia cresting in Paris that year" (p. 114).

Nevertheless, the shift in revolutionary rhetoric of the students did also reflect very real, ongoing transformations within domestic French politics at the time, as the French Communist Party (PCF) had started to appear increasingly hard-line and Stalinist in its approach following its refusal to criticise events in Hungary in 1956 and by following the Moscow line ever more closely regardless of evolving events. As Veronique says in the film, "it's the fault of the PCF, that's why we must seek our ideal thousands of kilometres away in Beijing" and this reflects considerable sentiment at the time. One prominent

**BETWEEN
MARXISM
AND
POSTMOD-
ERNISM:**

'Cultural Revolution'
and the Sino-Soviet Split
as Entertainment in
Jean-Luc Godard's
La Chinoise (1967).

intellectual figure – perhaps along with Jean-Paul Sartre – who embodied this new conflict between orthodox Marxism-Leninism (as per Moscow) and its new 'revolutionary' formulation (in Beijing) was Louis Althusser, who is mentioned throughout *La Chinoise*. Althusser remained loyal to the PCF throughout this period but had some sympathies for Maoism (Wolin, 2010, p. 121). Indeed, Colin MacCabe (2003) has argued that "it is certainly difficult, if not impossible, to imagine Godard's engagement with Maoism without Althusser" (p. 197) and the reference to him in the film would seem to bear this out, despite the ambiguity with which the subject matter is treated by Godard. However, and somewhat paradoxically, Althusser is an important figure here because he represents the other struggle – as opposed to the one moving away from orthodox Marxism – to resist the whole range of emerging 'unorthodox' variations of Marxist theory being ushered in, which, in addition to the evolving spectre of 'Maoism', proposed subjecting Marx's work to a 'cultural' critique which placed greater emphasis on an analysis of culture and on a 'critique of everyday life' (Lefebvre, 1948/2014; Vaneigem, 1967/2003). Thus, as Wolin (2010) has also suggested, an *image* of the Cultural Revolution in the PRC merged with synchronous developments in French cultural theory in Europe to create a 'cultural revolution' of an altogether different kind.

3.2. 'Cultural Revolution' within the European Left

In a previous film, *Made in USA* (1967), released in the same year as *La Chinoise*, Godard had made use of a slogan "gauche, année zero" – Left, year zero – which presumably enquired into the possibility for a transformation in the politics of the French/Western European Left. Similarly, in *La Chinoise*, we see Guillaume preparing for a lecture by writing "les perspectives de la gauche européenne" – perspectives for the European Left – in chalk on the blackboard in the room where the students hold their classes. Was 1967, then, the year in which politics could 'return to zero'?

In retrospect, a striking array of theoretical texts which would come to have a significant influence on postmodern philosophy was published in France in 1967, including Roland Barthes's *Death of the Author* (1967/1978), Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967/2012), and Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1967/2016), to name only the most significant. Within such a context, it is perhaps unsurprising that Godard continued with his own experiments, in a similar vein to some of the work cited above, by making

**BETWEEN
MARXISM
AND
POSTMOD-
ERNISM:**

'Cultural Revolution'
and the Sino-Soviet Split
as Entertainment in
Jean-Luc Godard's
La Chinoise (1967).

use of radical cinematic techniques in *La Chinoise* which called into question the 'truth' of an image (Guillaume: "I am an actor ... it's not because of the camera ... I'm sincere") and the limits of language (Guillaume and Veronique: "we are the words of others"), in addition to the film's overtly political subject-matter. At one point in the film, as Henri (Michel Semeniako) reads the words "it's the image of the impotence of the European Left", we are faced with a portrait of René Descartes which has been partially coloured in with red and blue crayon – just like most of the other portraits shown throughout the film (of Marx, Castro, Lenin, Stalin, Mao, etc.) – which reminds us of the critique of the Enlightenment which would come to exemplify so much of the postmodern scepticism developed over subsequent decades.

For the 'Maoist' students, then, the pursuit of orthodoxy (in Marxism, in Enlightenment values, etc.) had led to political impasse and impotence for those on the Left. For Eagleton (2004), such "political impotence and disenchantment" (p. 31) is precisely what helped to lay the groundwork for a transition to "culture as political struggle" (p. 26), in which "politics became increasingly a matter of image, icon, style and spectacle" (Eagleton, 2016, p. 147). Yet at the very same time, "culture was also a way for the civilised, humanistic left to distance itself from the crass philistinism of actually existing socialism" (Eagleton, 2004, p. 39).

If this were not already clear enough, we are again reminded of this historic "cultural turn" (Jameson, 1998) during the film's memorable train journey sequence, in which the real-life philosopher Francis Jeanson, Veronique's professor in the film, declares that he intends to pursue "cultural action" as he moves away from the French capital and into the countryside. Quite what this 'cultural action' will be, however, remains unclear and when asked by Veronique to elaborate, he ambiguously mentions something about theatre and acting which, in turn, also reminds us of Guillaume's reference throughout the film to the construction of a "socialist theatre" – an equally vague concept which, of course, never transpires.

And if 'culture' and 'everyday life' were moving to the forefront of political debate during this period, then Godard's focus on the ostensibly banal day-to-day lives of the characters in *La Chinoise* would itself also seem to reflect this interest. Despite the absurdist combination of having characters recite Marx and Engels whilst stumbling around an apartment in dressing gowns and painting barefoot – the film's focus on 'youth', that subsection of society so accentuated during the 1960s – is significant. And, after all, these were very much part of that paradoxical generation; the "children of Marx and Coca-Cola" which Godard had alluded to in his earlier film *Masculin, Féminin* (1966).

BETWEEN
MARXISM
AND
POSTMOD-
ERNISM:

'Cultural Revolution'
and the Sino-Soviet Split
as Entertainment in
Jean-Luc Godard's
La Chinoise (1967).

4. Colouring the Geopolitical Imagination: The Sino-Soviet Split as Entertainment

4.1. The Sino-Soviet Split as Entertainment

For Klaus Dodds (2007), 'popular geopolitics' is how "geopolitical representations and practices find expression ... in a host of media including television, music, cartoons, the internet, and radio" (p. 145). And just as Dodds (p. 151) argues that Hollywood depictions of the PRC and the USSR during the Cold War were particularly significant due to the general ignorance of US citizens about these places, Godard's depiction of these same two global powers (and the emerging conflict between them) in *La Chinoise* also cannot be overlooked. These representations are important given that few French citizens would have had any interaction at all with the PRC at the time.

"I don't trust the Russians so much" says Yvonne (Juliet Berto) at the beginning of the film as she likens the USSR to the United States for its opposition to Mao's China. This absurdly reductionist take on the complexity of Sino-Soviet relations during the Cold War is fleshed out in slightly more detail later in the film when Guillaume arrogantly informs us that "there are two types of Communism", one which President Johnson fights in Vietnam and the other "in Europe" which he does not. Guillaume explains that while Johnson "signs agreements with Moscow, invites Hungarian swimmers to Los Angeles" and "Czech violinists to play with the Boston Symphony Orchestra", he "destroy[s] the factories in Hanoi". His thesis, however serious we are supposed to take it, is that the Soviet Union has softened its application of Marxism-Leninism and thus became "revisionist" while China has continued down the 'true' revolutionary path as shown by Chinese support for North Vietnam during that period of the Vietnam War (the USSR would later play a more significant role in the conflict). Whilst such analysis seems simplistic, it does reflect the imbalance of power relations between the USSR and the PRC in terms of their respective involvement in the Vietnam War and their mutual suspicion during much of the Cold War following the Sino-Soviet Split (1956 – 1966).

Yet, despite the zealous rhetoric of the film's characters, any *realist* understanding of International Relations would, of course, argue quite convincingly that the breakdown in relations between the USSR and the PRC at the time could be attributed to the inevitable divergence of national interests in pure geopolitical terms, rather than to any complex ideological or theoretical incompatibility (Radchenko, 2010). This, of course, may have been

**BETWEEN
MARXISM
AND
POSTMOD-
ERNISM:**

'Cultural Revolution'
and the Sino-Soviet Split
as Entertainment in
Jean-Luc Godard's
La Chinoise (1967).

lost on audiences at the time, when most discussions of this nature would have focused on the adoption of nuanced yet divergent ideological positions. Yet, again, as with the 'Cultural Revolution' itself, what was important was the way in which events were interpreted rather than a purely factual account of the events themselves. Thus, the very real material events in the East marked by the souring of relations between the USSR and the PRC translates, in *La Chinoise*, into plot gags and rhetorical exchanges between characters interspersed with toy guns and images of comic strips. American power is encapsulated by model aircraft and a small plastic tank – which the characters periodically attack with their Little Red Books – and in one especially absurd scene we see Guillaume give an account of each of the world's superpowers by putting on sunglasses correspondingly coloured to that respective nation's flag. Humorous in retrospect, but far from an authentic analysis of the complex geopolitics of the Cold War, as we would expect.

4.2. Colouring the Revolution A Pop(ular) Geopolitics?

One of the most striking features of Godard's films during this period (1963 – 1967) is his radical use of colour or, more specifically, his radical use of primary colours, as has been discussed elsewhere (Gardner, 2019). *La Chinoise* is no exception as we are exposed to a deluge of primary colours almost immediately in the form of the apartment's artificial *mise-en-scène* (red and blue lampshades, bookshelves filled with red books, red curtains on white walls) as well as through the fashionable costumes of the characters (Henri's yellow jumper, Veronique's blue overalls, Yvonne's red shirt and blue cap, etc.). This approach has been described as "anti-realism" (Morrey, 2005, p. 56) and following Brecht – who Godard references extensively throughout the film – the characters in *La Chinoise* can seem, at times, much more like mere props in a 'situation' than genuinely human characters with whom we could feel some form of empathy or understanding. This, of course, is a typical provocation by Godard, but such an approach may also remind us of the "duplicity" (Hutcheon, 2001, p. 1) of the postmodern as we are unsure of how exactly to interpret *La Chinoise*, as outlined above. Regardless of how we are supposed to treat the *content*, however, the colourful *form* of *La Chinoise* and its representation of 'everyday life' reminds us again of Pop Art and its close association with postmodernism (Harrison, 2001) as mentioned earlier. Indeed, Godard's use

**BETWEEN
MARXISM
AND
POSTMOD-
ERNISM:**

'Cultural Revolution'
and the Sino-Soviet Split
as Entertainment in
Jean-Luc Godard's
La Chinoise (1967).

of colour and 'collage' in some of his earlier films has been, quite logically, discussed in relation to Roy Lichtenstein (Yacavone, 2005) in particular.

Yet, one can identify a particularly interesting sub-genre of Pop Art in the work of US artist Martha Rosler (b.1943) and the Icelandic artist Erró (b. 1932), whose works ironically juxtapose images of brutal violence and/or political propaganda from the Third World alongside the shiny domestic kitchens and bathrooms of the First. Such works share much with the *décor* of Godard's *La Chinoise* and, thus, beg a similar question. If one is to think critically about such provocative imagery, one must entertain the idea that although such works clearly aimed to engage with a radical politics and/or a critique of the perceived progress of advanced industrial capitalism in the Western World – by reminding their audience of the violence which underpins the material prosperity, exemplified by the suburban homes of Paris or Los Angeles – they also, inevitably, cheapen or banalise the very same imagery by removing it from its original context.

The image of members of the Vietcong superimposed onto the wall of a suburban American bedroom (Erró, b. 1968), for example, is a provocative and radical gesture, but it necessarily reduces the farmer to just that: an image. Similarly, the large red and yellow poster of Chairman Mao which adorns the kitchen of the apartment in *La Chinoise* – and which stands alongside the bottles of *Heineken* and *Ajax* reminiscent of the work of Andy Warhol or Tom Wesselmann – is reduced to much the same: striking imagery which blurs several disparate themes into one single collage void of any critical capacity. A 'pastiche', in the words of Jameson (1991; 1998), torn from its original context in an act of abstract violence. For Baudrillard (1983), and more negatively, Debord (1967/2012), given that any image is already so far removed from reality, such a juxtaposition merely functions as pure deception (spectacle) and serves only to mystify and satisfy the (critical-intellectual-political?) consumer or 'spectator'. And so rather than being presented with one coherent whole, we are exposed, instead, – in the spirit of the postmodern – to "a furious polyphony of decontextualised voices." (Connor, 1991, p.176).

**BETWEEN
MARXISM
AND
POSTMOD-
ERNISM:**

'Cultural Revolution'
and the Sino-Soviet Split
as Entertainment in
Jean-Luc Godard's
La Chinoise (1967).

5. Conclusion. Towards a Revolutionary Décor or a Décor of Revolution?

To conclude, the historical 'moment' in which *La Chinoise* was released was a period marked by great flux, an era of significant political and social turmoil and was, in many ways, defined by a crisis of ideology. There can be few richer examples of a film which encapsulates this dynamic historical 'moment' as clearly as *La Chinoise*. The film brilliantly manages to capture the decomposition of orthodox Marxism in 'the West' whilst simultaneously depicting the cataclysmic events of the 'Cultural Revolution' in 'the East'. Along the way, the film also reflects ground-breaking transformations in the visual arts whilst providing an albeit inaccurate portrayal of the geopolitical tensions between the PRC and the USSR. For all these reasons, I make the claim that the film – in both its content *and* form – is somehow caught 'between Marxism and Postmodernism'. Indeed, one might be tempted to argue that *La Chinoise* fluctuates between the 'death of the author' (Barthes) and the death of Stalin. Some pertinent questions which we may want to ask, however, remain unanswered. Does the representation of 'theory' only lead to more theories of representation? Did a (popular) representation of 'cultural revolution' – so in vogue amongst Western intellectuals at the time – further its cause or did it merely reduce the imagery, and thus the ideas, of this 'revolution' to one of the ordinary and banal, more trivial junk for the consumer scrapheap? Did Godard's cinema of the period – exemplified by *La Chinoise* – create a revolutionary *décor* or did it merely provide an empty *décor* for an idea of 'revolution'? The most interesting thing, of course, is that Godard was probably conscious of such potential contradictions at the time, and this is likely why he chose to turn away from 'mainstream' cinema altogether just a few months later.

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**BETWEEN
MARXISM
AND
POSTMOD-
ERNISM:**

'Cultural Revolution'
and the Sino-Soviet Split
as Entertainment in
Jean-Luc Godard's
La Chinoise (1967).

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COLONIALISM, HISTORY AND MEMORY IN ADWA:

*An African
Victory and Blood
is Not Fresh Water*

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COLONIALISM,
HISTORY
AND
MEMORY
IN ADWA:
*An African
Victory and Blood
is Not Fresh Water*

Introduction: The Repression of the Colonial Past

Italian colonialism in Africa has long been a forgotten chapter of recent history. The deletion of those sixty years from the Italian historiographical debate has prevented us from developing a deep analysis around Italy's colonial past. This has contributed to the the concealment of the violence to which the African populations were subjected during that occupation period.

Angelo del Boca, the first historian to deal with a critical rereading of Italian colonialism in Africa, describes this process of repression as follows:

Unlike other nations, where a serious reflection on the colonial past has been faced bravely, Italy has evaded this obligation; on the contrary, it has favoured the rejection of colonial faults, with obvious falsifications, hindering historical research. This explains why, even today, sixty years after the events, heated controversies are ignited on the use or not of gas in Ethiopia, and the myth of the "good Italian people" does not yet seem to be over. (Del Boca, 1998, p. 589)

This long process of collective repression, not only in the historiographical field but in the public sphere *tout court*, had an effect that is still perceivable nowadays. In particular, deeply held perceptions of Italians regarding contemporary migrations and the processes of racialisation has been clearly influenced by this lack of reflection on the country's colonial history. As Fiori Berhane argues in an article published in 2019 in the online magazine, *Il Lavoro Culturale*:

The elision of Italian colonialism, which preceded the fascists' invasion of Ethiopia and is often represented as a historical anomaly, generates a sort of collective amnesia through which the opinions Italians have on racial differences are considered simply as natural responses to recent and unprecedented demographic changes. Ignoring the Italian colonial legacy does not allow us to understand the substance and articulations of Italian racism. Statements such as "Italians were bad colonisers" or "we built everything there [in Eritrea] and got nothing in return", or "we went there to make love [in reference to the number of mixed-race children abandoned in colonies]", reflect a shared ideology

**COLONIALISM,
HISTORY
AND
MEMORY
IN ADWA:**
*An African
Victory and Blood
is Not Fresh Water*

that minimises the racialised violence of Italian colonialism and that influences current views on migration and racial differences. These common responses form the backbone of Italian racial ideologies - ideologies that have their roots in colonialism and its various forms of denial, deviation, minimisation - and they are the basis of the claims on how Italians themselves were historical victims of discrimination as immigrants. (Behrane, 2018)

Discussing the history of Italian colonialism thus not only means recovering sixty years of memory from oblivion and voluntary silencing and deconstructing the myth of the “good Italian people”, but also provides us with useful tools to understand the construction of an Italian racial identity which began in the colonial period but has evident links with contemporary racism.

The absence of a debate on the colonial past has obviously had repercussions on Italian cinema. The local film industry has long lacked the ability to critically narrate this systematically concealed chapter of history. Reasons can be found in production choices that mostly relegate historical films to the television market, and in the difficulties in deconstructing the narrative of a “colonialism with a human face” (De Franceschi, 2017, p. 134). We must also mention censorship measures that have long kept foreign films from telling these stories from a different point of view.

De Franceschi gives us an emblematic example of the difficulties in distributing films which seek to open a reflection on Italian colonial domination in Africa: *Omar Mukhtar - Lion of the Desert* (1981), a Libyan-American production directed by Mustapha Akkad, which relates the last years of al-Mukhtar, leader of the Libyan anti-colonial resistance, who was captured and sentenced to death in 1931 by the Italian regime. The film was distributed in most European countries but not in Italy, where the Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs of the Andreotti government, Raffaele Costa, blocked its distribution, describing the movie as “detrimental to the honour of the Italian army” (De Franceschi, 2017, p. 136). In 1987, a screening organised in Trento was prevented by DIGOS (Italian Antiterrorism Police), who seized the film and denounced the event promoters with accusations of offences against the military. We would have to wait until 2009, when Gaddafi visited Italy for an official meeting, for Sky to decide to show Akkad’s work on its Cinema Classics channel, thus putting an end to almost thirty years of censorship (Ferrari, 2009).

It is now evident that, for reasons of both economic and political order, our contemporary cinema has shown little interest in the history of Italian

**COLONIALISM,
HISTORY
AND
MEMORY
IN ADWA:**
*An African
Victory and Blood
is Not Fresh Water*

colonialism in Africa. It is therefore interesting to turn our gaze to the other side of the Mediterranean, to the countries that have endured this domination for more than fifty years, in search of a different narrative to reconstruct.

A first point to highlight is that the Italian ex-colonies are not particularly active from a cinematographic point of view, and the films produced in these countries that have tried to tell the experience of colonisation from a postcolonial perspective can be counted on a single hand (De Franceschi, 2017, p. 134).

This work will focus on Ethiopia and on how Ethiopian history and Italian colonialism have been perceived by two directors through the analysis of two documentary films: *Adwa: An African Victory* (1999) by Haile Gerima, and *Blood Is Not Fresh Water* (1997) by Theo Eshetu. Both of these films can be included within the cinematic trend that has been called “accented cinema”. This term designates some productions by so-called “third world directors” that have been carried out within Western production contexts.

Hamid Naficy, the Iranian scholar of postcolonial cinema who coined this term, defines the use of the word “accented” as follows:

If the dominant cinema is considered universal and without accent, the films that the diasporic and exile subjects make are accented. [...] The accent does not emanate so much from the accented discourse of the diegetic characters as from the confusion of the directors and their ways of artisanal production. [...] Another aspect of the accent is the style that characterizes these films, whose components, discussed within various chapters and various points, are an open or closed visual style; a fragmented, multilingual, epistolary, self-reflective and critically overlapping narrative structure; amphibolic, double, crossed and lost characters; themes and topics that include travel, historicity, identity and displacement; political, liminal, synaesthetic, euphoric, nostalgic and dysphoric structures of feeling; collective and interstitial modes of production; and the inscription of the director’s biographical, social and cinematographic (dis) location. (Naficy, 2001, p. 4)

Through these fragmented and overlapping structures, we will try to shed light on the memory of the colonial period in search of new traces in the history of Italian East Africa, trying to reconstruct a collective memory that has been hidden for too long.

The Adwa of the Italians?

Born in Gondar, Ethiopia, on 4 March 1946, Haile Gerima was the son of a theatrical writer, in whose plays he also performed as an actor when he was still just a boy. In 1968, Gerima emigrated to the United States to study theatre at the Goldman School of Drama in Chicago. After two years of study, Gerima moved to California to attend UCLA, earning his Master's degree in Fine Arts in Film. During this period, he joined a new school of African and African American directors that would later become known as the Los Angeles School of Black Filmmakers, or L.A. Rebellion Film Movement, which decided to work independently from the Hollywood production circuit.

Gerima's early works alternate between documentary film works (*Child of Resistance*, 1972; *Harvest 3000 Years*, 1976) and other experimental narrative films (*Bush Mama*, 1976; *Ashes and Embers*, 1982). In 1993 his feature film *Sankofa*, one of the first films directed by a black director to address the issue of slavery, was acclaimed at the Berlin Film Festival, where Gerima was nominated for the Golden Bear (Hedges, 1996, p. 119).

Adwa: An African Victory (1999), presented at the Venice Film Festival in 1999 in the "New Horizons" section, aims to reconstruct a culminating moment of the Abyssinian war and Ethiopian colonial history: the Battle of Adwa in 1896, in which Menelik's army inflicted a heavy defeat on the Italian armies.

In Italy, the battle of Adwa has never enjoyed great prominence from a media point of view, due to the fact that it was a bitter defeat for the army and interrupted Italian colonial desires for some time. Exceptions include some occasions when the commemorations of the battle caused a great sensation, an emblematic example being 1996 when the then Prime Minister of the Italian government, Lamberto Dini, refused to go to Ethiopia to participate in the commemorations for the battle's centenary, as he feared attacks by right-wing groups before the coming Italian elections (Triulzi, 2006, p. 435).

Gerima himself, in an interview with Laura Campanile, said:

There was a lot of hostility from Italy, especially because Italy continued to lie about its colonial history and, in fact, when the film was released some were not very happy. This was the case in Venice, for example, where after the premiere a boy faxed me a drawing in which my face was superimposed on Mussolini's body. Others got up and left while I was presenting the film. For me, it was a kind of revenge to present that film there in Venice,

**COLONIALISM,
HISTORY
AND
MEMORY
IN ADWA:**
*An African
Victory and Blood
is Not Fresh Water*

at the Festival created by Mussolini. I was very conscious of this. And let's say that we were not treated very well, even the way the organisation showed the film was a disaster, but some of the progressives, some newspapers like the manifesto, advertised us and supported us, even if I must say that most Italians have a very distorted view of history. (Campanile, 2011)

The film opens with a shot of the Ethiopian mountains, while an Amharic voiceover sings: "Adua, Adua? The Adua of the Italians?" The director's intention to contrast the official historiography and reconstruct a different memory and history is already clear, deconstructing the narrative of the "good colonialism" of the Italians. The film then continues with a mythological tale, the slaying of the dragon by St. George, used as a metaphor to narrate the resistance to the colonial invasion of Ethiopia. The film develops as a "sort of road movie of memory" (De Franceschi, 2017, p. 140), following the director's journey through the territories where the war against the Italians was fought, in search of a lost memory to rediscover.

Adwa: An African Victory aims to shift its focus from the colonisers to the colonised, trying not to tell the defeat of the Italians as much as the Ethiopian resistance and its victory against the colonial occupation. Indeed, the film focuses on the anti-colonial struggle waged by Emperor Menelik and his wife Taitu against the overseas invaders. Although the emperor and his consort are certainly central figures within the film, presented as an example of great rulers and strategists, Gerima's goal is not to recount their life and actions but to reconstruct the events that occurred in Ethiopia in 1896 starting from popular memory.

The message the director seeks to convey is thus that the victory of Adwa was not only a victory of the Emperor Menelik, but a victory of all the Ethiopian people. In this occasion the Ethiopians demonstrated themselves capable of putting aside cultural and territorial differences for a higher cause, developing a feeling of unity through resistance to the coloniser for the first time. As one of the people interviewed said: "It is difficult to identify a community or group that was not represented in Adwa, even communities that had joined the empire a few years earlier were present."

The question of resistance as a unifying factor in African history is in fact central to the film and to the director's entire film production. As Gerima himself states: "The tradition of resistance, in which people connect and make the world a place of struggle, fascinates and amazes me. This is the part of our

**COLONIALISM,
HISTORY
AND
MEMORY
IN ADWA:**
*An African
Victory and Blood
is Not Fresh Water*

story that I would like to be identified with" (Hedges, 1996, p. 120).

Bearing this in mind, Gerima tries to reconstruct a history "from below" that is diametrically opposed to the "top down", Eurocentric historiography that comes from Western countries. On this topic, in a conversation with Sarah Lewis published in *Aperture*, the director declared:

World War II began in Ethiopia. Ethiopia was the first country on which Mussolini declared war and the Ethiopians were the first victims of the use of poisonous gas. Their story has not yet been told. Why? Because we live in a Eurocentric and global universe, where our instincts and tendencies are managed and led by this superior empire, the US empire. (Lewis, 2016)

In order to tell their story, the director constructs a narrative that mixes myth, folk tale, audiovisual reconstructions of battles, and songs of resistance. The result is a story that tries to reconnect the different pieces of a collective memory with the aim of building an alternative testimony on the battle of Adwa. The recovery of these traditional narrative models becomes the main means of bringing to light the stories that have long remained outside the official history (Greene, 2012, p. 255).

In an interview conducted for the Italian presentation of the film *Teza*, the director himself expresses this need to find a way to tell an Ethiopian story for Ethiopians and the difficulties during the production process of the film. These considerations are equally valid when considering *Adwa: An African Victory*:

My battle is for identity. Who you are, how you speak, how you look at the world, and the logic of your thought process. If you were born in certain regions, you are left with a certain background. I've always tried to find out who I am, because I see the world in a certain metaphorical way. Many Africans want to censor the way they look at the world because they feel that Europe does not understand them. However, I think Europe will respect the way they look at the world in the future. When I was making the film, the biggest discussions between the producer and me were about how Europeans could get into my story. No one has ever asked me: will the Ethiopians understand? Ethiopians think in historical terms, basing themselves on

**COLONIALISM,
HISTORY
AND
MEMORY
IN ADWA:**
*An African
Victory and Blood
is Not Fresh Water*

a material, cultural reality, on human relationships. They continually invent metaphors, riddles. This too is important to preserve and amplify, without being ashamed. One of the worst failures of colonialism was to push the elite in Africa to be ashamed of its better past, its traditions, and everything has been misunderstood. So we automatically try to exile ourselves, forget the way our fathers looked at the world. (De Franceschi, 2009a)

History and memory in the tale merge and overlap, creating a narrative cloaked in magical realism, in which the tales of the battle are blended with legend. A striking example of this mixture of reality and fantasy is the story of one of the elders of Dessie, who was interviewed about the horse of Wole Butul, one of the tribal leaders who participated in the battle. The elder claims that the animal was able to eat all the food that sixty cooks could prepare in a working day, in a fantastic hyperbole that looks more like a myth than historical fact. The alternate editing process that marks the time of the film, in which the present is mixed with the past and the past returns to the present, helps to accentuate this atmosphere that appears to be poised between yesterday and today, between reality and imagination.

For the director, the recovery of this memory is also a process of recovering his African origin and thus a reaffirmation of his roots. Gerima, in an interview with Leonardo De Franceschi, reflects on his identity as follows:

I am Ethiopian, the son of Ethiopians who fought Italian colonialism. My father was a teacher. I had to go to America to understand that the cure for my alienation was history. For Africans, the real therapeutic experience is to find out who they are, to define themselves in relation to colonialism, so the children of colonial countries put the sense of guilt on the carpet: ah, you made this film to judge my people. For Africans it is a therapy, it is about understanding who one is. [...] Most African intellectuals live by pursuing the aim of understanding who they are, whether they become writers, or directors, like Ousmane Sembène. (De Franceschi, 2009b)

The process of rediscovering and re-appropriating one's identity also passes through the use of the Amharic language, a choice that Gerima maintained for

a large part of his film production.

The film ends with the story of how the victory of Adwa, the first victory of an African people against the colonisers, resounded in all the colonies up to the Caribbean and thus started the Pan-Africanist movement. In this way, *Adwa: An African Victory* re-signifies this hidden moment in the history of Italian colonialism as a topical and transformative moment in the history of oppressed peoples.

The film was supposed to have a sequel titled *The Children of Adwa (Forty Years Later)*, which the director was never able to make because the Istituto Luce and Rai (Italian national television) repeatedly refused to collaborate in the project or provide the archival materials on the subject in their possession.

Memory is Not Fresh Water

Theo Eshetu was born in London in 1958 and grew up between Addis Ababa, Dakar, and Belgrade before moving permanently to Rome. He studied Communication Design at the North East London Polytechnic and has worked in Italy as a photographer and video artist since 1982. Throughout the 1990s his work concentrated on the construction of a heterogeneous language between video art and documentary film. In 1992 his biographical documentary on Lindsay Kemp, *Traveling Light*, won first prize at the Berlin Video Festival.

In *Blood is Not Fresh Water* (1997), Eshetu deals with the history of his homeland starting from the history of Italian colonialism in Ethiopia.

Blood is Not Fresh Water is a hybrid film, halfway between a travel diary and a historiographical documentary, in which two parallel narrative lines cross: the director's trip to Ethiopia and the story of his grandfather, Ato Tekle-sadik Mekuria, one of the country's most famous historians, as well as one of the respondents in *Adwa: An African Victory*, in which he speaks about Ethiopian history.

The director's journey through the country in the company of his grandfather is used as a pretext to tell the extraordinary life of Tekle-sadik Mekuria and to take a journey back through the history of Ethiopia, starting from Italian colonialism, passing through the biblical story of the queen of Sheba, up to the discovery of Lucy, the "first human being", in search of the origins of the Ethiopian identity.

**COLONIALISM,
HISTORY
AND
MEMORY
IN ADWA:**
*An African
Victory and Blood
is Not Fresh Water*

The historiographical narration of Eshetu's film begins with Italian colonialism. The images of Mussolini's speech at Piazza Venezia are superimposed on those of the fascist bombings of Ethiopia and of the dead and wounded Ethiopians during the resistance to occupation, with an ending that reveals the inconsistency of the myth of the "good Italian people" and lays bare the violence of colonisation.

The audience follows a course of events which challenges and seeks to overturn the linearity of Western historical time, trying to build an African counter-history that tells the events from an emic point of view and questioning mainstream historiography, which often looks at the African world from a Eurocentric and exotic lens. In an interview with Selene Wendt published in the *Journal of Contemporary African Art*, Eshetu himself states that, more than the biographical question, what led him to tackle certain issues was the idea of counterbalancing the Eurocentric attitude in the artistic environment (especially the television one) and to push back against a way of seeing Africa either from a negative point of view or from one that enhances its exotic charm (Wendt, 2014, p. 100).

The story within the film is a multivocal and fragmented construction, which mixes historiographical elements in the most canonical sense (the story of the Italian colonial invasion) with mythical / religious elements (the tale of the Queen of Sheba, the Ark of the Covenant), anthropological elements (Lucy's discovery), and everyday life and popular culture. This construction of a kaleidoscopic story, which contrasts with the Eurocentrism of Western historiography, in which Africa is told only from an external point of view, is directly inspired by the work of Eshetu's grandfather. In the interview with Selene Wendt, the director says:

As a writer he studied Ethiopian history through the writings of foreigners. He absorbed what the Italians, French and English wrote and how [Ethiopia] was represented in the bible and other religious texts, and then proceeded to write a history of Ethiopia for the Ethiopians, creating his own narrative freed from a Eurocentric perception of Ethiopian history. In a certain sense, I tried to imitate his approach by studying different ways of exploring the theme of origins, from a historical, anthropological and religious perspective, merging them into a single narrative line. Ultimately, the video has become a portrait of him in his style. (Wendt, 2014, p. 104)

**COLONIALISM,
HISTORY
AND
MEMORY
IN ADWA:**
*An African
Victory and Blood
is Not Fresh Water*

For Eshetu, who grew up mostly in Europe, this journey is configured as a sort of pilgrimage in search of his roots, trying to understand a country that both belongs to him and is foreign. Emblematic in this sense is a phrase from the patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, who argues that one cannot be a foreigner in one's own homeland. Eshetu is in a liminal position between the inside and the outside, and it is precisely in the exploration of this transnational identity that we find the core of the biographical part of the film. Even the use of language reflects this transnational gaze of the director, with speeches in English, Italian and Amharic mixed throughout the film. The image that transpires is that of a country at a crossroads of stories and cultures, in which the memory of an imagined Ethiopia and the representations created by television of a real Ethiopia overlap. As the director reminds us, the latter are no less imaginary than the former (Wendt, 2017, p. 103).

The fragmentary editing becomes a mirror of memory itself, in which the images of the present refer to the past while the past itself is reread through the present. The memories of the director's grandfather are recovered through his tale, which transmits Ethiopian history to his grandson. But the memory in the film is not only that of Eshetu; it is also the collective construction of an Ethiopian memory cleansed of Eurocentrism and stereotyping visions of Africa, with a look at the present that refers to the country's millennial history, through images that "are intentionally fleeting and, before you can focus on them, disappear like memory itself" (Wendt, 2017, p. 104).

Conclusions

The rejection of the Eurocentrism of Western historiography and the questioning of a stereotypical vision of Africa are tools for the creation of new narratives and new paths in the history of the two directors' homeland. Their goal is to build a history of Africa from Africans for Africans, through the recovery of a collective memory that has been systematically removed by the colonisers and denied to the colonised. Eshetu and Gerima decided to incorporate their biographical experiences into the film through the journey, a common element in both works. The journey back to their country of origin is the means by which they become aware of their identity and position in the world, re-appropriating their own history and, in this way, building a true African counter-history of Italian colonialism.

The rediscovery and re-signification of these events pass through the memory of the people whose fathers and grandfathers fought to resist the Italian colonial invasion. By placing these discourses back at the centre of history, the directors are able to elaborate a new point of view that acts as a counterpoint to dominant historical narratives, deconstructing the myth of colonialism with a human face.

The privileged channel for the re-appropriation of this memory thus becomes myth, intended as a collective construction that gives meaning to reality, and which is transmitted orally (it is certainly no coincidence that, in many African cultures, the main vector of the transmission of the past were the tales told by the elderly to the young). The two directors follow the path of Jan Vansina (1985), recovering orality as the source of history and, through legends, stories and popular songs, reaffirming their Ethiopian identity by constructing a discourse that, in its fragmentation and multivocal nature, allows them to tell their own story to a plurality of voices that have been silenced for too long.

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**COLONIALISM,
HISTORY
AND
MEMORY
IN ADWA:**

*An African
Victory and Blood
is Not Fresh Water*

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ABOUT
THE
AUTHORS

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Dr. June Givanni is a film curator, archivist and international consultant in the area of Pan-African cinema who has been working in this sector for close to 40 years, initially with the GLC's 'Third Eye' festival of 'Third World Cinema' in 1983. She continued her curatorial work over the following two decades with organisations such as the British Film Institute, where in her pan-institute role she ran the African and Caribbean Unit for six years, leading major national projects including the Africa 95 multifaceted film project Screen Griots; and promoting Black British and Pan-African Cinema through the Black Film Bulletin, which she co-founded with Gaylene Gould. She also edited the book *Symbolic Narratives: African Cinema*, reporting on the major Conference "Africa and the History of Cinematic Ideas" that she and the ACU organised at the BFI in 1995. She curated the "Planet Africa" film strand for 4 years at the Toronto International Film Festival in the late '90s, and programmed with the Images Caribes Film Festival, Martinique, between 1988-1992. June has curated and promoted Pan-African cinema in institutions and festivals on the African continent, on the Indian sub-continent, and in the Americas. In 2018 she received an honorary doctorate from SOAS (London University), and in 2020 she received the BIFA Special Jury Award. She is the founder director of the June Givanni Pan-African Cinema Archive (JGPACA).

Matthew Mason

Matthew Mason is a PhD Candidate in Culture Studies at the Lisbon Consortium. He holds a bachelor's degree in French and Italian from Manchester Metropolitan University and a master's in international relations from the University of Kent, Brussels. His research revolves around the work and theory of the Situationist International, the films of Jean-Luc Godard, and the political implications of postmodernism. He has an additional interest in the broader areas of cultural and intellectual history, philosophy, and film studies, and is currently engaged in teaching English at Universidade Católica Portuguesa in Lisbon.

Riccardo Uras

Riccardo Uras has studied foreign languages and cultures at the University of Cagliari. He holds a master's degree in cultural anthropology and ethnology from the Alma Mater Studiorum - University of Bologna, focusing on postcolonial theory, migration, and mobility studies. At the moment, Uras is a PhD Candidate

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Ros Gray

Ros Gray is Senior Lecturer in Fine Art, Critical Studies in the Art Department at Goldsmiths, where she has led the development of the MA Art & Ecology programme. Her research has investigated militant filmmaking, particularly in relation to liberation struggles and revolutionary movements in Mozambique, Angola, Portugal, Guinea-Bissau, and Burkina Faso. This research informs her monograph *Cinemas of the Mozambican Revolution: Anti-Colonialism, Independence and Internationalism in Filmmaking, 1968–1991* (James Currey, 2020), among many other publications in journals and books. In recent years, her research has increasingly focused on artistic interventions in the fields of soil care, cultivation, and decolonial ecologies more broadly. In 2018 Ros co-edited with Shela Sheikh a special issue of *Third Text* entitled “The Wretched Earth: Botanical Conflicts and Artistic Interventions”, and in 2020 they produced *The Coloniality of Planting* for the Camden Art Centre’s podcast series *The Botanical Mind*, which was also published as an article in *Architectural Review* in 2021.

She has contributed to numerous publications by artists whose practice involves cultivation, including *Cooking Sections*, Åsa Sonjasdotter, and Carl Gent. Ros is a founding member of the Critical Ecologies research stream at Goldsmiths, and she is on the Editorial Board of *Third Text*. Ros coordinates the Goldsmiths Allotment, which provides a space for plant cultivation for staff and students, is a platform for various seasonal cultural events, workshops on aspects of sustainable gardening, and is a space for meditation and developing thinking around forms of ecological ‘care’ in the context of an educational institution. She is currently leading the planning of an Art Research Garden at Goldsmiths and has convened the CHASE series of lectures and workshops “What Can a Garden Be?”, which seeks to explore and challenge the coloniality of the garden through artistic research and activist practice that involves anti-racism, climate justice, and rewilding.

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