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The Replaceability Paradigm



Replacement and Irreplaceability from Dante to
DeepDream

Edited by
Niall Martin and Ilios Willemars

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Sara Magno

The Ir/Replaceability of the Witness-Perpetrator in Salomé Lamas's *No Man's Land*

Introduction

I first encountered *No Man's Land* (2012) by Portuguese filmmaker and artist Salomé Lamas at Solar: Cinematic Art Gallery,¹ in 2017, as part of her solo exhibition. The film was installed on the lower floor of the gallery, approached via a long stairway. The sound of my steps walking down the stairs and into the room exaggerated my presence within the empty space. There was a cold and uncomfortable concrete bench in front of the screen, inviting me to sit and watch the film while, at the same time, indicating that what I was about to see would not necessarily make me feel comfortable.

Every film imagines its own ideal spectator, it assumes a certain relation between the body of the spectator and the properties of the image on the screen. Thomas Elsaesser (2015) makes a distinction between classical narrative cinema and documentary film by the way each of them engages, addresses, and envelops the spectatorial body in distinct ways. This holds for the architectural arrangement of the spectatorial space, the temporal ordering of performances, the specific social framing of the visit, the sensory experience of sound and other sensory input, as well as for the imaginary construction of filmic space through *mise-en-scène*, montage, and narration (4). The ideal spectator for *No Man's Land*, as I was about to discover, was one that would engage with this film as a witness, and it was the witness as a subject that prompted my reflections on replaceability discussed here.

Realist film theory has often brought attention to the (semi)transparency of the filmic medium, which supposedly turns its audience into (in)direct witnesses. It is partly due to the specificity of the medium, but also due to Lamas's realistic approach to her film that watching it left me feeling as if I had been conscripted as a witness to one man's testimony, namely that of 66-year-old José de Figueiredo. Describing his professional activities from Angola to Mozambique, from El Salvador to the Basque country, directly facing the camera, and in the first per-

1 Solar – Galeria de Arte Cinemática, is an institution known for supporting contemporary artworks and artists working at the border between cinema and other arts. The gallery is located in the small village of Vila do Conde, on the north coast of Portugal. The exhibition title is "Salomé Lamas: Solo," and it was open to the public from October 14 until November 25, 2017.

son, he begins to tell one of the most brutal stories I have ever heard. Throughout the film, I followed detailed accounts of his involvement as a hired killer for special military forces during the Portuguese Colonial War (or the Wars of Independence as they are known in the former colonies of Mozambique, Angola, and Guinea), and subsequently, as a member of a covert death squad established by the Spanish government to annihilate high-ranking members of ETA,² and his work as a mercenary for the CIA³ in El Salvador.

Realist film theory, however, is not sufficient to describe the difference between watching a realistic film and being made a witness to a film. More adequate, from my experience, is the response by one of Professor Shoshana Felman's students who, after a screening of Holocaust victim testimonials, exclaimed: "I have managed to survive, whole and a bit fragmented at the same time, but decidedly altered" (Felman and Laub 1992: 55). I also felt "decidedly altered" after watching *No Man's Land*. The crucial difference being that this film did not portray the testimony of a survivor of horrific violence, instead, it documented the testimony of a perpetrator. I had never previously stood face to face with a killer from the Portuguese Colonial Wars, I had never heard the brutality of these wars described in such a chilling manner, nor had I encountered testimony of this nature in any history books – certainly not those we were given at school. To try and make sense of the effect the perpetrator's words had on me – including why, while watching this film, I became a witness to it – I will firstly consider what defines and what distinguishes the witness-survivor from the witness-perpetrator.

Witness testimony has been the central focus of trauma theory – a cultural investigation that grew out of memory studies and the "Ethical Turn" in the 1990s and early 2000s – relying on the abundance of survivor testimonies registered after the Holocaust. The prolific writing on witnessing shares one commonality: the idea of the *irreplaceability* of the witness (Felman and Laub 1992; Wieviorka 2006; Agamben 1999; Derrida 2000). As an example, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (1992) do justice to Paul Celan's well-known poem "no one bears witness for the witness," when they too acknowledge the radical uniqueness and solitude of the witness: "to bear witness is to bear the solitude of a responsibility and the responsibility, precisely of that solitude" (Felman and Laub 1992: 2–3). Or, as Jac-

2 ETA, an acronym for *Euskadi Ta Askatasuna* ("Basque Homeland and Liberty" or "Basque Country and Freedom"), was an armed leftist Basque nationalist and separatist organisation in the Basque Country (in northern Spain and southwestern France).

3 CIA, the Central Intelligence Agency is a civilian foreign intelligence service of the federal government of the United States, tasked with gathering, processing, and analysing national security information from around the world, primarily through the use of human intelligence.

ques Derrida stated, “the witness is someone whose experience is in principle singular and irreplaceable” (Derrida 2000: 190).

Witness' testimonies after the Holocaust were considered irreplaceable and for that reason it became imperative for society to record witness' statements on tape and film in order to organize and keep them safe in archives for future study. This urgency provided a particular kind of authority to the witness allowing Felman and Laub to claim that the twentieth century was “an era of testimony” (Felman and Laub 1992: 6). Later, the epithet served Annette Wieviorka's book titled *The Era of the Witness* (2006). Wieviorka proposes a further study to understand how the witness became a significant cultural form and how the Holocaust survivor, in particular, acquired legitimacy as a bearer of truth and, thus, as an irreplaceable figure for the writing of history. Wieviorka affirms that testimony's impact began with the Eichmann trial, an investigation that is commonly read alongside Hannah Arendt's classic account, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1964). As a result of the trial, Wieviorka argues, the witnesses acquired a new socially recognized identity as a “survivor,” which gave rise to a “new function: to be the bearer of history” (Wieviorka 2006: 88).

Furthermore, in “Poetics and Politics of Witnessing,” Jacques Derrida (2000) explains that in its Latin etymology, the word witness finds its roots from the word *testis*. Another word for witness is *superstes* which refers to the witness in the sense of survivor. The witness-survivor, as explained by Derrida, is someone who has experienced an event first-hand, and by virtue of having survived, can assume the role of the witness (186). Being a figure endowed with a double presence, witnesses are present “there” at the event and simultaneously present “here,” thus they are able to provide a connection between the reality of now (the moment of bearing witness) with the reality of then (the event testified to). Derrida also mentions the word *terstis*, which refers to the eyewitness: someone who is present at an event but as a third person. The eyewitness is neither the victim nor the perpetrator, not acting nor directly suffering; their supposed impartiality and distance provide them with authority in a legal context.

In this sense, *terstis* effectively serves not only to identify the maker of the film as a witness but also myself as a witness to the film. To make it more explicit: this object puts me into the position of the *terstis*, or the listener, which is a necessary position that seems to structure the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator. Merely being impartial and distant to the events described in the film is what in legal terms would offer me some kind of authority. As I see it, however, it is not so much an authority that is granted to me but rather a responsibility that is imposed upon me. From this standpoint, as I began to research this topic, I faced the fact that in comparison to witness-survivors, witnesses-perpetrators were less

considered in theory.⁴ The latter have, nonetheless, increasingly been driving numerous documentary filmmakers to address perpetrators calling attention to their need for theorization.⁵ This is probably so because this is a difficult and burdened topic to take on.

The difficulties that I felt in thinking irreplaceability through the figure of the perpetrator and the politics of witnessing, however, are concerns that other scholars have also reflected upon. The first difficulty has to do with the fact that there is an unbridgeable distance between the listener, myself, and de Figueiredo's experiences, which requires me to distinguish carefully between empathy and identification (Weigel 2023: 44). The second involves the understanding of the ideological aspects that are used by the perpetrators to justify dehumanization, torture, and killing, in other words, to degrade the "fundamental essence of the victims" (Üngör and Anderson in Hirsekorn and Vice 2023: 569). The last difficulty is in line with a reflection offered by Sibylle Schmidt when she writes that perpetrators' testimony offers an insight into "the mind of a perpetrator," but it risks repeating in discursive terms the obliteration of the victim (Schmidt 2017: 100). This risk is nonetheless worthwhile taking if it helps in questioning or deconstructing the official narratives of regimes that are accomplices with the atrocities committed (Hirsekorn and Vice 2023: 586).

As a critical response to these difficulties, it is relevant to note that the formal properties of Lamas's documentary film in presenting a perpetrator's testimony have shaped my reading experience and determined the ways in which the questions of ethics and aesthetics central to the genre are addressed. Through close reading, a research method that can scrutinize cultural-political experience when combined with artistic, historical, social, and philosophical research (Levine 2015; Brown 2017) was applied to the following analysis of Salomé Lamas's *No Man's Land*. Simultaneously, my reading of the film was also oriented toward finding meaning in a particular aspect of witnessing.

On account of the fact that, after the Holocaust, the witness-survivor was considered unique and irreplaceable, the analysis that follows will attempt to find out what it means to be irreplaceable. The question arises whether it is possible to conceive the figure of the witness-perpetrator as irreplaceable as well. In addi-

4 In theory, witness-perpetrators have been considered, but they were considered later and not in the same proportion. The *Journal of Perpetrator Research* (JPR) editors date the current upswing in interdisciplinary interest in perpetration to the 1990s, a time they refer to as the "era of the perpetrator" (Knittel et al. 2017: 1). More recently in 2014, the book *My Neighbor, My Enemy: Justice and Community in the Aftermath of Mass Atrocity*, by Elizabeth Blum, has focused on perpetrator testimony as a source of understanding and reconciling the aftermath of mass violence.

5 See footnote number 11.

tion, I will question what responsible witnessing entails with regards to the logic of irreplaceability that can be found when we pay close attention to the formal categories of subjectivity that are formed around the dynamic between witness-survivor and witness-perpetrator. The aim of this chapter is thus to show how the witness's account of what happened as the perpetrator is irreplaceable not because it is true or factual but because *it contributes to the violence inflicted on the victim* and *because it gives a fuller understanding of that violence*. The testimony of the perpetrator is itself part of the violence conducted *and* paying attention to it, I believe, provides for a more expansive understanding of how that violence is structured.

The irreplaceable testimony

The editing structure of *No Man's Land* reinforces the differences between the two voices in the film: one is the witness-perpetrator, or the perpetrator-narrator, who offers a personal account of his murderous experiences; and the other is the filmmaker as *terstis*, or the author-narrator, re-narrating the story for her audience. Lamas presents de Figueiredo's story in three different layers of a particular chronological order. One layer corresponds to the five days that Lamas continually interviews de Figueiredo. Another corresponds to historical and geographical events as de Figueiredo remembers them – “1st Day: Africa: Colonial War”; “2nd Day: Rhodesia, El Salvador – CIA”; “3rd Day: GAL Antiterrorist Liberation Groups”; “4th Day” (there is no subtitle – in this chapter de Figueiredo speaks about his childhood and his relationship with his family); “5th Day” (Lamas films him at the campsite where he lived together with other homeless people). Another layer, primarily relevant to this discussion, corresponds to Lamas's editing, dividing the film into a sequence of numbered subchapters – from 1 to 89. This division confers a particular cadence to the film: it breaks de Figueiredo's statement into fragments, emphasizing parts of his memories.

Fragmentation is a recurrent aesthetic decision within artworks dealing with testimony, in particular survivors' testimony, they make visible the incompleteness of memory and testimony itself. An indication of that incompleteness can be found in Felman and Laub's observation stating: “what testimony does not offer is a complete statement, a totalizable account of the events” (Felman and Laub 1992: 5). In *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, Giorgio Agamben reaffirms the incompleteness of testimony stating that “every testimony [. . .] contains a lacuna” (Agamben 1999: 33), to which he adds the following comment:

[. . .] not even the survivor can bear witness completely, can speak his own lacuna. This means that testimony is the disjunction between two impossibilities of bearing witness; it means that language, in order to bear witness, must give way to a non-language in order to show the impossibility of bearing witness. (Agamben 1999: 39)

This reflection on the witness draws inspiration from Primo Levi's description of a child mumbling in the darkness of the concentration and extermination camps at night. The child repeats a word several times, which no one in the room is able to fully understand. Levi cites the word as sounding something like "mass-klo", or "matsklo". It is a word that does not make sense uttered by an individual who was not yet dead, nor completely alive, but who existed only in a mode of survival. In this place that Levi describes, the language of the witness is either silence or a word that has not been heard before – a language that does not yet have any meaning. Agamben describes it as a lacuna: "[. . .] that 'lacuna' that constitutes human language, collapses giving way to a different impossibility of bearing witness – that which does not have language" (Agamben 1999: 39). He also suggests that every spoken word, as well as writing, is born in this sense, as testimony. The sound of the child's cry at night is the sound that rises from the lacuna, it does not replace the witness's testimony, it is testimony itself, anew, irreplaceable, a generative capacity that language finds on the threshold of its limits. To be irreplaceable thus, is to be generated anew, which is not the same as to say that the new could replace the old. Rather, to be irreplaceable is to have that generative capacity to always create something new, something unheard of, as in a testimony.

Every time Lamas interrupts the testimony with a new section, we are reminded of this lacuna in the testimony to which Agamben calls attention; it is as if she would make that lacuna visible to her audience. The breaks are there, it seems, to remind us that this testimony is something unprecedented, unheard of and, as we will see, irreplaceable. In one of the film's fragments, de Figueiredo states:

We never took prisoners. Just bodies. [. . .] I usually preferred using a grenade, to say the least . . . It's just that they looked like monkeys jumping around. They were marmosets. With one grenade they were really marmosets, in pieces. [. . .] I liked the army, I liked killing, I liked seeing blood. But always for truth, never for pleasure. But blood and gunpowder are like coke and heroin, it gets in your blood. [. . .] When I arrived in Portugal, to feel good I had to go to São José Hospital to the emergency room, see people coming in bleeding and that sugary smell, it gets into your blood. It's an adrenaline rush. (Paulo de Figueiredo in *No Man's Land*)

De Figueiredo describes his experience as a mercenary during the Portuguese Colonial War in Angola during the dictatorial regime of Oliveira Salazar, which

lasted from 1926 until 1974, and his subsequent psychological state after his return to Portugal. As an introduction to the scenario of war that is being reported here, it is relevant to point out one of the ideological threads of the regime at the time: that of *lusotropicalism*.⁶

Although the ideology of the dictatorial regime is too complex to address within this space, it is important to note the importance of the idea of lusotropicalism within that ideology insofar as it claims that the Portuguese are distinguished by a special kind of inclination or capacity for miscegenation, and hence makes a claim for the exceptionality of Portuguese colonization methods. In light of its alleged capacity for miscegenation, Portugal promoted discourses that it had engaged in a form of “soft colonization,” by encountering and colonizing other peoples with supposedly less violence and racism, and more miscegenation and dialogue than other European nations. As a pervasive narrative, the notion of lusotropicalism and Portuguese “soft colonization” became hegemonic and part of people’s everyday consciousness, instilling a myth that lasted long beyond the dictatorship ended and, in some contexts, continues even today.⁷

6 During Oliveira Salazar’s government, the Portuguese colonies in Africa were exploited not only economically, but also in the official representations meant to create an expanded sense of Portuguese national identity. Concurrently, anticolonial protests began to increase and Angolans, as well as other Portuguese colonies at the time, such as Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, and Cape Verde were active in organising resistance and pro-independence movements. It was also during this period that several other European colonial powers were actively engaged in processes of decolonization. However, even under huge international pressure, Portugal remained the last country in Europe to withdraw from its colonies in Africa. The dictatorial regime attempted to justify this persistence in modern colonialism in Africa by promoting the concept of lusotropicalism invented by the Brazilian anthropologist, Gilberto Freyre. The social and cultural underpinning of Portuguese imperial doctrine – lusotropicalism – can be explored in Gilberto Freyre’s “The Portuguese and the Tropics: Suggestions Inspired by the Portuguese Methods of Integrating Autochthonous Peoples,” 1960; a collection of essays published following a government-sponsored tour of Portugal’s African territories, providing a guide to the author’s theory of “lusotropicalism.” Freyre’s main ideas on the Portuguese people (the absence of racist feelings, the ability to empathize with other people, and the profound Christian fraternity) are appropriated, in the 1950–60s, within the official discourse.

7 The concept of lusotropicalism and its political and cultural impact in Portugal can be read, for instance, in Miguel Vale de Almeida’s “Portugal’s Colonial Complex,” (2008); Fernando Arenas’s “Lusophone Africa. Beyond Independence,” (2011); Cláudia Castelo’s “*O modo português de estar no mundo: O Luso-Tropicalismo e a Ideologia Colonial Portuguesa*,” (1998) – a study of the political, cultural, and psychological roots and influences of the idea of lusotropicalism and its enduring place in the collective Portuguese consciousness throughout the twentieth century and beyond; Norrie MacQueen’s “Re-defining the ‘African Vocation’: Portugal’s Post-colonial Identity Crisis,” 2003; and online, following the link <https://networks.h-net.org/h-luso-africa>, it is possible to follow several historiographical debates on lusotropicalism, and other related areas, bringing together scholars and observers of Portuguese-speaking Africa from across the world.

Lusotropicalism wanted to be settler colonialism's antithesis. If, on the one hand, settler colonialism⁸ was the most radical and violent form of colonialism – advocating the replacement of indigenous populations with the invasive settler society, perpetuating the erasure of natives as a precondition for settler expropriation of lands and resources – lusotropicalism, on the other hand, reflected a self-conceived Portuguese sense of imperial exceptionalism that was advocating a modern method of colonization where the use of violence was not necessary, and indigenous populations and settlers could coexist peacefully. In other words, lusotropicalism was based less on replacing people and more about mixing them, ultimately serving as a pretext for replacing them.

The key here is the idea of lusotropicalism as a form of “exceptionalism” arrayed against all the other replaceable forms of colonialism and the people who have been replaced by colonialism. De Figueiredo's testimony shows, however, that lusotropicalism cannot operate as a sufficient account of the form of colonialism in which Portugal was involved because it shows how Portuguese colonialism, similar to other forms of settler colonialism, also worked under the rubric of replacement. Or, in other words, despite the efforts to promote an image of Portugal as exceptional among other examples of European colonization in Africa, there are records that refute this idea and this is evidenced by experiences from figures on the ground that contravene the myth of the “soft colonizer.” De Figueiredo was such a figure: he was hired as a mercenary to eliminate the resistance movement of Portugal's colonial project or anyone suspected of being associated with it. His purpose was not to mediate or to negotiate, as the quote above confirmed, he never took prisoners, just dead bodies – in this instance, the dead body epitomizes the ultimate function of replaceability. His testimony reveals a life made of pure brutality, ordinary colonial racism, and numerous extra-judicial killings: “The trophies were more of a joke” adds de Figueiredo to his testimony; “They didn't need them anymore, neither the head, nor the fingers, nor the ears. We adorned the Jeeps with that . . . and my belt. Passing by other *Sanzalas* (slums), showing them what it was like, what the pay-back was for what they have done.”

If in some situations the dead bodies of his victims were trophies, there were others when the bodies needed to disappear: “What is it like to bury a dead person?” de Figueiredo asks, anticipating the viewer's question; “It's very hard work because you have to dig a hole about 1.5m deep, you don't need a coffin, you throw it inside and cover it up. All of them have rocks on top in case there's a dog

⁸ See Alicia Cox's *Settler Colonialism* (2017), where the author argues that settler colonialism is an ongoing system of power that perpetuates the genocide and repression of indigenous peoples and cultures.

digging. If an animal digs because of the smell of the body, it won't reach the dead." What this statement shows is the perpetrator's account of the victims as replaceable humans, and it is precisely their replaceability that justifies, according to the perpetrator, the violence inflicted upon them.

There is perhaps another way of articulating the relationship of the perpetrator to his victims' replaceability: "No one bears witness for the witness," writes Paul Celan (Celan 1967: 68; Neugroschel 1971: 240),⁹ because the true witness, the complete witness, is dead. If the dead are the only credible witnesses, what does this signify to the killer who has witnessed the moment of their death? Perhaps it is necessary to begin by acknowledging that the concept of the "witness" is overdetermined by the presence/absence relationship. The perpetrator is present (then) in the moment of their victim's absence, and is present (now) in the moment of sharing the location of their victims' dead bodies. The complete witnesses thus are both the victim and their perpetrator. The paradox here is that, despite their "replaceability," the perpetrator transforms their victims into complete and irreplaceable witnesses, while he himself is irreplaceable from the dark side of the equation.

A question of trust

De Figueiredo's testimony is interrupted by Lamas's diary notes, which she records as a voice-over. In her diary entry after the first day of the interview, Lamas writes:

November 2011. Paulo is determined to tell the truth, what really happened. I'm interested in his truths, not in mine, not in anyone else's. He offers sublimated portraits of the cruelties and paradoxes of power, as well as the revolutions that deposed it only to erect new bureaucracies, new cruelties and paradoxes. His work as a mercenary lies in between these two worlds. (Lamas in *No Man's Land*)

Lamas regards de Figueiredo's statement as a truthful testimony that does not seem to fall into any structure of denial. On the contrary, Lamas's position is that he seems to recognize himself as a perpetrator, which means that she does not need to immediately mistrust him. Her readiness to credit the perpetrator's testimony invites her viewers to do the same, affecting the way his testimony is perceived. What is at stake in this first part of the film is thus a question of trust.

9 From the poem "Aschenglorie," in *Atemwende* trans. Joachim Neugroschel.

Lamas says that she is interested in “his truth, not in mine, not in anyone else’s.” By doing this, she implies that de Figueiredo’s testimony and his experience as a witness is absolutely individual and irreplaceable. At the moment, Lamas is not asking for further proof – perhaps she knows that, at this point, proof would “contaminate or divert the sense of ‘bearing witness’” (Derrida 2000: 188), as Derrida writes, which is followed by an extreme conclusion, namely that no act of testimony can be verified because it is a question of belief:

I have been present. I bear witness. I affirm (rightly or wrongly, but in good faith, sincerely) that that was or is present to me, in space and time (thus, perceptible), and although you do not have access to it, not the same access, you, my addressees, you have to believe me, because I am committed to telling you the truth, I am committed to it, I tell you that I am telling you the truth. Believe me. You have to believe me. (Derrida 2000: 189)

Here, Derrida writes in the first person from the perspective of a witness. He makes clear the implicit oath and the invitation to trust as fundamental to the witness as irreplaceable, and as fundamental for granting witnessing its authority. In this text, Derrida sums up a long period of work that resulted in numerous essays, lectures, and seminars on witnessing. An aspect of this particular text that was important at the time of its writing is his response to attempts to elevate Holocaust revisionism to the status of historical research. He points out the fact that it was precisely because of revisionism’s central argument around the irreplaceability of the witness that witnesses of the Holocaust were questioned as reliable sources or proof of the event. In other words, Holocaust revisionism claims that the witness is irreplaceable, and because there is no one who has witnessed the Holocaust completely, the witnesses who do exist do not count as witnesses. This argument, or logic of irreplaceability, happened to be used as a justification to deny the validity of the Holocaust as a historical fact.¹⁰ Derrida’s text re-problematizes and reconfigures the status of the witness departing precisely from the perspective of its irreplaceability.

Later in the text Derrida asserts that “all responsible witnessing involves a poetic experience of language” (Derrida 2000: 181). There is much to be unpacked in this affirmation. “Poetic experience,” on the one hand, refers to witnessing as a sequence of three singularities being: “a singular act, concerning a singular event and engaging in a unique, and thus inventive, relationship to language” (Derrida 2000: 199). “Responsible witnessing,” on the other hand, points both at the poetic and political experience of witnessing. In witnessing, Derrida adds, being present to oneself determines one’s responsibility. Lamas portrays de Figueiredo as being

¹⁰ Today, Holocaust revisionism is regarded as a fringe discourse of politically motivated denial, not as History.

present to himself, meaning altogether having-been-present to the events he describes and being present to the filmmaker – and indirectly to her audience, me in this case. Presence to oneself or self-consciousness – which is another way of putting it – involves bearing witness before one's own consciousness – “a phenomenology of an experience which is itself phenomenological, in other words which consists in a *presentation*. It is the presentation of presentation, the testimony: here there is witness for the witness, testimony for the testimony” (Derrida 2000: 194).

De Figueiredo's “presentation” appeals to our trust. But, can or should we trust the witness testimony as being true? Testimony, Derrida concludes, is not proof. The act of bearing witness only makes sense when the witness is testifying to something unprovable because witnessing to what can be proven is not testimony but rather a tautology – just as forgiving the forgivable is not forgiveness, an act of real forgiveness would be forgiving the unforgivable, as Derrida convincingly demonstrates. Hence, he proposes a recognition of the problematic, paradoxical nature of witnessing and testimony: the witness stands alone and is irreplaceable. This is not a lack but a strength, according to Derrida. This is what validates the brutality of the event of the Holocaust: the fact that no one can speak for the dead victims, precisely because they are impossible to replace.

The anxiety of being replaced – of having one's testimony replaced – aligns the idea of the irreplaceable with the position of the victim. In defending the irreplaceable, we are defending the victim – the victim is always understood as valuable in their singularity. Their authority is born out of their relation to irreplaceability. This is why it can be problematic to readily accept the perpetrator's relation to irreplaceability.

How is it possible to situate Lamas's initial invitation to trust the perpetrator's testimony within Derrida's definition? Conceivably, the invitation to trust aligns the perpetrator with the victim and urges the viewers to assume all testimony as irreplaceable. All testimony, including that of the perpetrator, can be deemed as irreplaceable *in the poetic sense*. As a poetic experience the testimony of perpetrators and victims share the same three singularities: an act, an event, and how they express themselves through language. As political experience, however, aligning the victim with the perpetrator and assuming that they share the same authority that irreplaceability confers to the victim, is not without risk.

Denying the perpetrator's authority

The particular problem of a relationship with the witness as perpetrator is not discussed in Derrida's poetics and politics of witnessing, and it is that problem I wish to discuss here. In "*L'émergence d'une «littérature» de non-écrivains: les témoignages de catastrophes historiques,*" Catherine Coquio has argued that perpetrators of the Holocaust cannot be considered as witnesses for they merely comment "in a documentary way" upon their "difficult and demanding job" (Coquio 2003: 29). Holocaust perpetrators, it is argued, often defend their action by claiming that they not only obeyed orders, but they also obeyed the law. Here, Coquio applies the emphatic concept of bearing witness exclusively to those who are bystanders, or victims, and denies it to perpetrators who she says cannot be regarded as witnesses of subjective experience.

From another perspective, Sibylle Schmidt's (2017) more recent text, "Perpetrator's Knowledge: how can we learn from perpetrator testimony?" points towards three aspects for a testimony to be effective: trust, truth, and authority. These three aspects, she argues, are fraught with a significant risk when applied to the witness-perpetrator. In essence, it is argued, testimony is a social practice, a sort of dialogue with normative social implications, it is a language-game where the listener has to engage in a certain way – like sitting on a hard concrete bench and engaging with the violence of a perpetrator's recognition of the cruelties inflicted on their victims. While testimony binds speaker and audience together, however, the listener faces a dilemma: "if we decide to accept the invitation to trust and believe the perpetrator-testifier, we risk believing a false testimony" (Schmidt 2017: 94). Perhaps this would not be untrue to witness-survivors as well; a witness is in essence unreliable. Yet, Schmidt points out one other risk that I consider more important to bear in mind: "by giving former perpetrators the space to recount the story from their perspective and by giving credit to their authority, there is the risk that the annihilation of the victim is repeated on a symbolic level" (Schmidt 2017: 100). If this assumption is correct, how is it possible to avoid providing the perpetrator with such authority? Does this mean that the witness-perpetrator cannot, or should not, be deemed as irreplaceable in the same way as the witness-survivor?

By the end of the second day of filming, de Figueiredo tells Lamas that after the Portuguese Prime-Minister Sá Carneiro's death in 1980, he was contacted by the CIA to be sent to El Salvador as a guerrilla fighter. He says that his experience there was not dissimilar to when he was deployed in the Portuguese colonies in Africa. De Figueiredo compares the two as being guerrilla wars, saying that the intention in El Salvador was to eliminate people following the American strategic plan to generate panic on the ground. During this interview session, he also dis-

closes the role he played as a member of the Antiterrorist Liberation Group (GAL), a death squad said to be illegally established by the Spanish government to annihilate high officials of ETA. At this point, his statement becomes even more complicated, several individuals involved are named, and the descriptions of the killings are more precise, showing exceptional attention to detail and strong visual memory. Regardless of the brutality that seems inhuman and despite small contradictions, he seems almost to relish remembering the details of his work:

I make a price to whoever asks me to liquidate x people. I evaluate the person and make the price. In GAL's case, it was 10 million pesetas per man killed. [. . .] No. I never executed for money. But money interested me. If there was no money, there was no job. But deep inside it is the revulsion I have for cowards. For me, it is inadmissible that a force such as ETA can be set up. Who had fun putting bombs in schools, putting bombs under cars of innocent people. Because whenever they hired me, I went straight to the target and to the right person. Their case is different; they killed more innocent than guilty. That is why I provided that service to them. [. . .] When the law doesn't allow killing your fellow man, and your fellow man keeps killing whoever, there has to be a solution. Since the law doesn't allow you to kill, someone takes over the killing part. (Paulo de Figueiredo in *No Man's Land*)

After this statement, Lamas changes her strategy of mediation, and in the second part of the film, she adopts a different approach to de Figueiredo's testimony, opening a further investigation and offering more information to his accounts. For example, Lamas reads a note written in December 2011:

El País wrote: "No one in their right mind can suggest that members of the international mafia are killing members of ETA by their own initiative, inflamed by their love of western civilization's values." After what was heard in several French and Spanish trials, it is appropriate to ask: who recruited, organized, armed, supplied and paid GAL's mercenaries? Who approved the assassinations, decided on the victims, and gave orders to shoot? Who covered their strategic retreat towards the Spanish border? (Lamas in *No Man's Land*)

In the first part of the film Lamas trusts viewers to decide for themselves if they should trust de Figueiredo; now, Lamas compares his testimony with other sources. As a *terstis* of the witness-perpetrators' discourse, in other words: as a bystander, Lamas resorts to a strategy that allows her to dissociate herself from the position of the killer and infuse the discourse with her own voice, thereby actively framing the narrative, consciously directing the interpretation of the story she recounts. This framing neutralizes her decision to give the perpetrators a voice and avoids placing all trust in de Figueiredo.

The perpetrator's statement is, in this second part, treated as a trace rather than as a witness testimony. Testimonies can be used as traces, clues, or sources of historical investigation. Witness testimony, and in particular the testimony of victims, however, shares the fact of being considered irreplaceable, and is there-

fore invested with a specific kind of authority different from other types of sources. A comment written in a newspaper, such as the quote from *El Pais* presented by Lamas, for example, can be considered one source within an investigation; and together with other sources, or traces, such as documents, photographs, or fingerprints, may lead as potential proof of a certain case. Traces are not irreplaceable – a photograph can replace a document, and a fingerprint can replace a photograph. Traces are not unique in the sense that witness testimony is, and their authority is shared with other traces. The crucial distinction here is that the corroborating document is by definition a sign (pointing to something that it is not), whereas the claim to irreplaceability of testimony is its inadequacy as a sign, pointing to the gap – to the lacuna – in the act of signification. By treating de Figueiredo's testimony as a trace and therefore as replaceable, it does not mean that Lamas does not recognize the testimony's uniqueness but rather that she disavows it from a singular authority. It can be said that the replaceability Lamas is granting to his testimony at this point is the result of the replaceability inflicted by the violence itself. In other words: there is a kind of irreplaceable replaceability in the testimony of de Figueiredo.

Recognition and replaceability

“Responsible witnessing,” as already mentioned, means to be present to one's own conscience. Witnessing presupposes a chance encounter with an event and, as such, it is only possible to become a witness retrospectively by way of a speech act in which one claims to have been present at the time the event unfolded, and to have seen it with one's own eyes (Felman and Laub 1992: 5). “No one has borne witness” (Agamben 1999: 38), one becomes a witness. Would this apply to the perpetrator? Can the perpetrator become a witness retrospectively? Have perpetrators not planned, anticipated, and prepared their crimes? At first, it seems contradictory to claim this but, in fact, a witness does become a witness retrospectively, being a victim or a perpetrator. The testimony of the perpetrator, as we see it in Lamas's film, is actually in line with the violence perpetrated; therefore, it is through its recognition that the violence becomes visible to us. The moment of telling, of recognition, is what makes a witness a witness. It might be that the victim is less prepared, or never prepared, to become a witness because they cannot anticipate the event, and that the perpetrator is better prepared for the action, but are they prepared for recognizing their action, their guilt? Being conscious of, or prepared for, the event is one thing. To consciously become a (responsible) witness is only possible retrospectively.

As referred to earlier, etymologically, the word witness does not include the perpetrator. Because perpetrators cannot be deemed as *testis* nor as *superstes*, I searched for the figure of the witness-perpetrator in an alternative place: in *Wrong-Doing Truth-Telling: The Function of Avowal in Justice* (2014) – Michel Foucault's interpretation of the Oedipus tragedy. As we shall see, responsible witnessing, or the political experience of witnessing, as taken from this interpretation of Oedipus points to the witness-perpetrator holding a different relation to replaceability from the one approached until now.

In Oedipus, Foucault observes, a juridical problem can also be manifest if we look at it with the task of discovering the identity of an unknown perpetrator. With this in mind, Foucault conducts an interpretation of the play not so much as a psychological drama but more as a juridical paradigm. Foucault explains how, in the tragedy, the fortune of Oedipus does not reveal the truth. Still, it is the revelation of the truth, the recognition of Oedipus's real identity that constitutes the peripeteia: the reverse of the good fortune of the character that leads him to his fall. The tragedy is built entirely on mechanisms of recognition. There are two main correlated moments of recognition: Oedipus' recognition of who he is, and the chorus' recognition of the juridical validity of the truth. The truth is uncovered and is practically told through a game of questions and answers. This game is an "act of discovering signs, traces, marks, that allow us to go from what we don't know to what we do know by piecing together the material elements that lead from one to the other with high probability" (Foucault 2014: 75). This piecing together of material elements is the formation of a technique to discover truth interrogating their meaning or their referents. At a certain moment, the play unfolds like a true juridical process: the interrogation of identity, questions about what the witnesses did, what happened, and so on. Truth is produced in the form of the interrogation of witnesses: an interrogation, or a "procedure of avowal," that will focus on what the witnesses did.

In addition to insisting on the interrogation of witnesses, Oedipus, the "true perpetrator," is also one who will restore order in society based on the outcome of this interrogation; however, Oedipus's recognition that he is the true perpetrator will also condemn him to public shame. According to Foucault (2014), Oedipus was necessary for the creation of a judicial machine capable of producing truth, yet he was eliminated as an excess in the very machine he helped to create (81). The lesson of the tragedy, as we have learned from this interpretation, is that the veridiction obtained by the procedure of interrogating witnesses is a kind of veridiction that gains from the perpetrator's acknowledgement, or avowal, for the order to be reconstituted. There is, at the source of this interpretation, *a correlation between the figure of the witness with that of the perpetrator*. The correlation

happens precisely in the moments of recognition of the perpetrator, and by the perpetrator himself.

Oedipus and Figueiredo work analogously. They both concern the manner in which witnessing is a performance that produces truth and contributes to it in a specific sense (which is why I believe we need to pay attention to the perpetrator as well, because their witnessing is also part of that procedure). *No Man's Land* stages the moment of the avowal of the witness-perpetrator and requires the recognition of his actions. There are also two main moments of recognition in the film: one happens right at the opening of the film when Lamas asks: "In your opinion, what's the purpose of this film? What do you think we're doing here?" and de Figueiredo answers, "What are we doing here? To tell the truth, I don't know for sure. I know I wanted to tell the story of my life . . . and then everyone can think what they like" – this statement represents de Figueiredo's avowal and willingness to tell his story. The other moment of recognition, as already mentioned, is Lamas's recognition of de Figueiredo's testimony as truth and her appeal to the audience to trust him. But there is still one other moment of recognition that needs to be considered before we may conclude. Later on, towards the end of the film, Lamas narrates the following:

Paulo doesn't have any ID. I can't find any official records in his name. Although the events he describes are different from what's been reported they have obvious similarities. He tells me that the material I shot has no value without the documents to support it. He adds that I'll never understand his life choices and that he's not used to having someone "chasing him". I tell him that it is obvious that our stances are different. I say I care about him. Weeks later Paulo gets in contact saying he has gathered the material that supports his testimony. This meeting will never take place. (Lamas in *No Man's Land*)

Here, Lamas describes how, in the process of making the film, de Figueiredo becomes evasive, stops answering her attempts to speak on the phone, and does not show up for their arranged meetings. During their last interview, he confesses that his life has no meaning, not because of the violence he committed but rather because simply living does not mean anything to him anymore. Can his evasiveness and absences mark his own becoming present to himself? Perhaps it is possible to question if it is then that he is finally becoming a witness to his own testimony.

During the last years of his life he had become homeless without the possibility of contacting his family, whom he describes as being highly educated and enjoying a certain degree of privilege. He confesses that his decision to become a mercenary and later a hired killer had nothing to do with his upbringing; he explains that he simply volunteered for the job. When Lamas meets de Figueiredo, he is living the final years of his life under a bridge in the company of an African

refugee. In the last scene of the film, the camera follows him to this place, and amongst a mess of plastic bags and containers, Figueiredo sings an Angolan song improvised with his friend. Perhaps it could be said that in this scene we see the final denouement of lusotropicalism's profession of miscegenation: in this scene, de Figueiredo is portrayed as having become replaceable with his former victims. Lamas's final note appears right after this scene; this time she does not read it out loud, the text appears on screen for the viewer to read:

Epilogue: It was agreed that Paulo would be the first person to watch this film. If it wasn't for the agreement, there would be no mention of Paulo's death. I've just realised that I'm telling this news to everyone I know, even to those who aren't close, as my thoughts in this affliction were that everyone should know Paulo and if they didn't, it was their fault.

Lamas calls for the recognition of de Figueiredo as imperative. Yet, what does this moment of recognition consist of?¹¹ *No Man's Land*, as the title suggests, points at the ambiguity of a situation, jurisdiction, or to an investigation that was never resolved. De Figueiredo is a *persona non grata*, he is an ambiguous figure that lives outside of the official historical records. De Figueiredo is kept outside Portuguese colonial history official narratives because his experience and testimony contradicts the idea of lusotropicalism that still remains. This ultimately leads to a very specific debunking of lusotropicalism.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, the discourse of lusotropicalism served the regime to justify their colonial presence in Africa at the time. It is only recently that the history of Portuguese colonization has been broadly interrogated and with it the notion of lusotropicalism. For example, in *Plantation Memories: Episodes of Everyday Racism*, artist and writer Grada Kilomba (2008) writes that

¹¹ Other films documenting perpetrators' testimonies, such as Gianfranco Rosi's *El Sicario, Room 164* (2010); Wang Bing's *Fengming, A Chinese Memoir* (2007); Rithy Panh's *Dutch, Master of Forges of Hell* (2012); Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing* (2012); Shlomi Elkabet's *Edut* (2011), which also accommodate a moment of recognition of the perpetrators of war they portray. See, for example, the last scene of Oppenheimer's film when Anwar Congo, the leader of an organised militia group authorised by the Indonesian government to murder communists, recognizes himself as a perpetrator – until that moment he shows a heroic perspective of himself. Or in *Edut*, a film that complicates further the relationship between victims and perpetrator, which presents testimonies of Palestinians who have suffered from the war with Israel. Here, instead of the testimonies being delivered by the Palestinians themselves they were delivered by Israeli actors who assume the character of the original witnesses. The replacement of the victim by the (alleged) perpetrator can be interpreted as an implicit act of the perpetrator's recognition of the inflicted suffering in their victims. These contemporary documentary films that focus on perpetrators; testimony can be seen as representing a growing interest in the perpetrators' psyche and the search for a moment of self-recognition.

Portugal is still in denial of its violent past. Kilomba argues that “(to decolonize) has to do with a psychological process that goes from denial to guilt, from guilt to shame, from shame to recognition and from recognition to reparation” (Kilomba 2008). Perhaps the recognition of de Figueiredo claimed by Lamas indicates the need to recognize the replacement of the discourse of the “soft colonization” for its opposite. There is mounting evidence that contradicts the idea of the Portuguese as “soft colonizers” and de Figueiredo’s testimony could clearly add to the evidence refuting its historical accuracy; moreover, I am arguing that the recognition of the irreplaceability of the testimony of the perpetrator is necessary to recognize the forms of evasion involved in the myth of lusotropicalism as a fiction that prevents the possibility of bearing witness to the past, which is an essential component of reimagining the global present. In other words, I am claiming that the irreplaceability of the testimony of the perpetrator operates in a different way to that of the victim because it bears witness to the violence inflicted in a different way that is fundamental to make visible the structure that underpins this violence.

To give voice to this figure potentially comes with the risk of *re*-living the violence committed against the victims – this idea is central to this investigation – to justify such a risk, however, we must accept that perpetrators’ testimony is necessary to highlight the nature of the violence of rendering victims replaceable as well as to enact the possibility of change: the film sets up a mechanism for the recognition of the perpetrator to such an extent that it implicates the replacement of a (still dominant) colonial discourse – lusotropicalism, and participates in an ongoing process of decolonization. This is perhaps the *peripeteia* in de Figueiredo’s story and the final link I would like to propose between the witness-perpetrator and replaceability: this process of decolonization, paradoxically, is itself a slow process of replacement, and the replacement of lusotropicalism is only one aspect of it. As Ute Hirsekorn and Sue Vice eloquently state,

[n]arratives of remembrance of the perpetrator can expose their atrocities, their patterns of thinking and what lies behind them, and lead to public condemnation on the one side and questioning or deconstructing official narratives of regimes on the other. (Hirsekorn and Vice 2023: 583)

The film ends with the suggestion of de Figueiredo’s death and with this we understand the impossibility of confirming his identity and his story, or to bring any justice to the crimes he participated in committing. Considering the way this film has also made me a witness (*terstis*), I cannot help but conclude that we can relate to the witness-perpetrator only insofar as the irreplaceability of this figure is operative. In sum, even though the problem is not exclusive to this film, de Figueiredo’s violent testimony allows us to carve out the larger issue of irreplaceability

and replacement in relation to witness testimony in general, as well as the idea that the testimony of the perpetrator is part of what structures the violence inflicted on the victim/survivor and produces them as replaceable.

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