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Writing the Nation Beyond Resistance: Portuguese Film and the Colonial War

Au-delà de la résistance : Représenter la Nation et la guerre coloniale dans les films portugais

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Abstract

La Révolution des Œillets (avril 1974), période charnière fondamentale de l'Histoire du Portugal, marque la fin d'une longue dictature et d'une douloureuse guerre coloniale. Cet événement historique déclenche un processus complexe, celui d'une reconfiguration de l'identité nationale qui s'appuie sur une révision de la mémoire collective officielle. Ainsi peut-on remarquer plus de trente années après la fin du conflit, la persistance d'une réticence, ou devrait-on dire d'une résistance, à l'idée même d'évoquer les faits et les événements liés à la guerre coloniale. Cette résistance étant plus particulièrement perceptible dans la littérature et au cinéma, cette étude se penchera sur deux films majeurs : *Non, ou la vaine gloire de commander* (*Non, ou a Vã Glória de Mandar*) (1990), de Manoel de Oliveira, et *Le Rivage des murmures* (*A Costa dos Murmúrios*) (2004), de Margarida Cardoso – qui proposent une réflexion sur les questions de race, de genre, de classe et d'idéologie qui ont marqué l'agenda colonial, une réflexion qui alimente toujours le débat

postcolonial portugais (tant sur les plans politiques, sociaux ou culturels), incapable de se délivrer de ces fantômes impériaux, qui hantent toujours le peuple portugais et qui invalident les rapports pouvant exister envers l'Autre.

Index terms

Index de mots-clés : avril 1974, Révolution des Œillets, Portugal, guerre coloniale, dictature, mémoire, cinéma portugais, Non ou la vaine gloire de commander, Oliveira Manoel de, Le Rivage des murmures, Cardoso Margarida

Index by keywords : April 1974 Revolution, Portugal, Colonial War, dictatorship, memory, Portuguese cinema, No or the Vain Glory of Command, Oliveira Manoel de, The Murmuring Ghost, Cardoso Margarida

Full text

Porque camandro é que não se fala nisto?

Começo a pensar que o milhão e quinhentos mil homens que passaram por
África não existiram nunca [...].

António Lobo Antunes, *Os Cus de Judas*

- 1 My starting point for the reflection on how the representations of the Portuguese Colonial War have contributed to writing Portugal as a nation is the epigraph I have selected for this essay, taken from a book entitled, in English, *South of Nowhere: A Novel* (1979) written by António Lobo Antunes, who was one of the first novelists to discuss the Colonial War and its effects on Portuguese society. He wonders:

Why don't people talk about this? I start to think that the one million and five hundred thousand men who went to Africa have never existed [...].¹

- 2 Antunes's protagonist, by questioning why people do not talk about a war that mobilized one million and five hundred thousand men in Africa, calls the attention to the veil of silence that Portuguese society drew over this controversial historical event during the period of the *Estado Novo* (the New State), and after the April 1974 Revolution. Despite the initial propaganda of the New State's ideological machine at the very beginning of the conflict, intended to stimulate young men to defend the African colonies, towards the end of the 1960s the official discourse changed to claim that the overseas provinces were at peace and integrated into the Portuguese nation. It was then necessary to obliterate the idea of a long and violent conflict, and to refute the fact that the Portuguese defeat was a real possibility.² After the April 1974 Revolution, the silence was due to Portuguese people's inability to deal not only with a painful legacy, but also with the need to forget the old regime and to forge a new beginning, despite the fact that the men who led the Revolution were the same as those who fought the Colonial War. The first attempts to work through this traumatic past are illustrated by different media, such as novels, films and documentaries that started to appear at the end of the 1970s. Most of them focus on biographical war memories, and promote the discussion of the role of memory in the reconfiguration of national identity.
- 3 With an interest in the symbolic filmic reconfigurations of Portuguese national identity after the end of the Colonial War and the loss of empire, my aim in this essay is to examine two feature films that, in very different ways, not only address the revision of the official public memory, but also challenge

the clear resistance to discussing the events related to the Colonial War a few decades after the end of the conflict. The films are *No, or the Vain Glory of Command* (*Non, ou a Vã Glória de Mandar*) (1990), directed by Manoel de Oliveira, and *The Murmuring Coast* (*A Costa dos Murmúrios*) (2004), directed by Margarida Cardoso. Like Allan and Zelizer,³ even if in a different context of war reporting, I consider the films to be alternative spaces for the act of witnessing. They promote not only a mediation of witnessing and of the distant suffering of all those directly or indirectly affected by the Colonial War, but also configure a critical medium through which it is possible to write the nation from different perspectives.

4 This corpus has been selected on account of the films' epistemological and ideological dimensions and of the different critical aesthetic modes of reporting war they represent. The facts that, on the one hand, filmmakers belong to very different generations, and, on the other, experienced the war in diverse ways make me consider their films interesting products of cultural memory not only due to their specific ways of remembering a traumatic past, but also because they leave traces on the memory they create, having thus, as Astrid Erll points out, the "potential to generate and mold images of the past which will be retained by whole generations".⁴

5 Oliveira is a renowned cineaste, whose work has been internationally acclaimed throughout his long life (he is 103 years old), during which he has witnessed the main historical events of the 20th century. His work constitutes a fundamental reference in Portuguese culture, which grants him a special status when reviewing Portugal's historiography and the gaps in it. Moreover, the fact that the film is dedicated to the director's grandchildren converts it into a kind of testimony, a message to future generations that is worth paying attention to. For her part, despite not belonging to the generation that conducted the war, Cardoso lived in Mozambique during the conflict. Her experience in Africa and her memories are those of a child of a former combatant, a "child of the war", since her father was a pilot in the Portuguese Air Force.⁵ Despite this fact, when remembering her childhood,⁶ Cardoso refers to the awkward silence at home as the conflict continued, even though the whole family had to cope with the threat of her father's potential death whenever he left for a mission. Cardoso's film is a remediation of Lídia Jorge's novel of the same name, translated into English as *The Murmuring Coast* (1988), and results from the belief that Jorge's novel provided her with an answer to a long and acute anxiety, since people simply did not talk about the war when she was a child in Mozambique and, even afterwards, during her adulthood back in Portugal. Cardoso's film thus stems from a personal need to break the wall of silence about the war that acquires a public and a political dimension, since her motivation translates the collective anxiety of a whole second generation which wants to address a problematic national past.

6 The directors' approaches to the Colonial War are very different as far as the visibility/invisibility of war is concerned, which has ideological and aesthetic implications. Within the framework of the films on the Colonial War produced after the conflict, Oliveira's is one of the few that clearly depict the violence of war and the reality of the battlefields, albeit in a highly aestheticized way, as I shall try to demonstrate. Cardoso's film, on the other hand, discusses the issue of silence about the war during and after the conflict and addresses war violence from a female domestic perspective, following Jorge's option.⁷ Both plots focus on the impact of war on the protagonists: in Oliveira's film, an officer (Alferes Cabrita) who was studying History at the university when he was sent to Africa; in Cardoso's film, a young metropolitan woman (Eva Lopo,

known as *Evita*) who goes to Mozambique to marry an officer serving there. The fact that the protagonists are young people reinforces the epistemological dimension of the films, since their experience of war constitutes a learning process about themselves at an individual level and about the nation at a collective level. Moreover, the fact that the films teach about a controversial period in national history leads spectators to reflect on their own ethical responsibility as far as the future of the country is concerned.

7 Oliveira's *No, or the Vain Glory of Command* is centered on the intersection of the depiction of the Colonial War and of other conflicts crucial to Portuguese history through the articulation of temporal and spatial planes. The protagonist, Alferes Cabrita,⁸ tells various stories to the men of his company during their dislocations in the African jungle or while waiting for combats. The stories correspond to central historical episodes and are portrayed having the soldiers themselves as characters. This strategy is a subtle way Oliveira finds to convey the idea that all wars are similar, and, to a great extent, stupid when the suffering inflicted on the military and civilians is taken into account. In fact, the anonymous soldier fighting for a cause that most often he does not understand or agree with, but that is presented to him as being a motive of glory, could be the hero that the historiographical discourse transforms into a myth. While remediating historical events in a grandiloquent way that evokes the official rhetoric of the New State, Oliveira subverts this discourse in his film as I explain below.

8 What is particularly curious in Oliveira's film is his selection of events and their remediation, since the historical episodes represent heavy defeats at key moments in Portugal's history as a nation (as the Colonial War was to be). The reference to them calls the spectators' attention to the "vain glory of command" of the title. Oliveira's selection leads Fabião, Krus and Ramos to state that Cabrita's stories provide spectators with a "pedagogy of defeats",⁹ since the officer portrays a nation that, stigmatized by its soldiers' sacrifices, is able to redeem itself cyclically, experiencing a kind of rebirth through a redemptive pain. The cinematic remediation of the episode of the "Island of Love", from Camões's epic *The Lusíads*, that recalls the idyllic recompense courageous men able to sacrifice themselves for the homeland would enjoy, is not enough to mitigate the underlying horror and frustration of a pedagogy of defeats. On the contrary, Oliveira's remediation of the literary epic is marked by kitsch and characterized by an ironic tone that help deconstruct the apparent benefits of sacrifice on behalf of the nation. According to Krus, through his stories, the officer somehow prepares his soldiers for a potential and imminent death, which will be his own on the day the 1974 April Revolution takes place. The depiction of Cabrita's last moments of life in a hospital ward is especially symbolic, since spectators are exposed to the reality of war violence (illustrated by seriously wounded men), and to the description of one of Cabrita's nightmares. The latter recalls the key defeat in Alcácer-Quibir (1578), marked by King Sebastian's disappearance, which paved the way, on the one hand, for the loss of Portuguese sovereignty and decades of Spanish political control, and, on the other, for the myth of Sebastian's messianic return that would fulfill the prediction of Portugal's glorious destiny. But Cabrita's death is quite real and it reinforces the pessimistic tone of the pedagogy of defeats. However, the date of his death is particularly significant, since the Revolution marks the end of the Colonial War and may be interpreted as the nation's definitive refusal of the Portuguese vain glory of command. In other words, the Revolution potentially epitomizes the "non" of the film's title and introduces a mark of hope in a different future.

9 If Cabrita's stories in Oliveira's film clearly break the silence on the Colonial War, Cardoso aestheticizes silence in her film from the very beginning, through a mediated representation of life in the colony and through a gendered perspective of enunciation. The mediated representation practically omits references to the landscapes of war. It consists of a set of period images that depict the arrival of soldiers and their relatives at the airport: women and children on the beach, enjoying the good weather and the exuberant landscapes of the colony, and the apparently peaceful coexistence of black and white people in the streets. If, as Mark Sabine argues, the dominant tone is clearly nostalgic¹⁰ and is reinforced by Simone de Oliveira's hit "Sol de Inverno" ("Winter Sun", 1965), the only sign that a conflict is taking place is the presence of uniformed soldiers who are portrayed behaving casually and not always on duty. In sum, the dominant atmosphere in the frame of the film is of an apparent political normality while a war is going on.

10 The same atmosphere of social peace and stability seems to dominate Evita's wedding ceremony even though the references to war are undeniable. Not only is the groom a young and good-looking officer, but so are most of the guests, who are dressed in impeccable light colored uniforms. Even the wounded soldiers on leave who attend the wedding party are uniformed. Guests dance and enjoy a good time as if the war that these men are fighting were a distant reality. This atmosphere of social happiness starts to be deconstructed soon after her marriage by the protagonist's learning about life in Africa and about the reality of war, when Evita no longer recognizes the former boyfriend in her husband and when she witnesses the frequent outbursts of violence of other officers towards their wives, children and neighbors.

11 The gendered perspective of enunciation definitely contributes to subverting the apparent normality of life in the colony. With a view to denouncing the social oppression of women under the old regime, Cardoso, despite resorting to the extra-diegetic voice-over of the protagonist in later life, subtly explores mostly what she does *not* say. In fact, Cardoso explores Evita's intense and penetrating gaze, through which she absorbs daily life in the colony and progressively learns about herself, her husband and her nation. If in *No, or the Vain Glory of Command* Oliveira stresses Cabrita's oral narration of war events through the remediation of historical battles and epic literary works as stories are told to soldiers, in *The Murmuring Coast* sight is the privileged sense. Evita's sharp and critical eyes are like a metaphorical camera that either through close-ups or long-shots reveals the social tensions underlying the imminent demise of the colonial empire and of its patriarchal society. It is interesting to observe that Evita's perspective is similar to that of spectators. She is a voyeur who observes the African empirical world from a distance, since she is an *Other* to the colonial system. This distance is subtly stressed by two elements: frames and filters. Evita is usually portrayed contemplating people and landscapes through different frames (namely, the hollow divisions in the hotel room,¹¹ and windows – the window of a bus, the window of her hotel room, the window of Helena's house). As far as filters are concerned, Cardoso refers in interviews to the fact that she frequently placed cloth between the camera and filmed objects. These strategies reinforce not only the importance of Evita's revelation (as if she were a spy observing something that was covered or hidden), but also the ambiguities of the process of remembrance. Moreover, Cardoso's resort to close-ups of Evita's expression as she discovers about the violence of war transforms the protagonist's face into a mirror that reflects and mediates the violence

spectators are often not allowed to see, but only to imagine. By visually privileging Evita's reactions and facial expressions instead of her words (despite the importance of the aforementioned extra-diegetic voice-over) Cardoso strategically and eloquently uses Evita's silence to denounce and to address the burden of a social and political silence.

12 The analysis of the relevance of Evita's gaze in Cardoso's film sends me back to Oliveira's *Non, or the Vain Glory of Command*, and, more specifically, to the end of the film. When Cabrita is dying in the ward, already under the effect of drugs, his words seem to be senseless, acquiring meaning when spectators are presented with the remediation of his hallucinations with King Sebastian. Oliveira skillfully intertwines shots related to Cabrita's dream, the depiction of Cabrita in the hospital bed dying, and the reactions of a scared wounded soldier that observes the doctors' attempt to save the officer's life.

13 Despite the fact that King Sebastian is portrayed in Cabrita's dream inflicting suffering on himself (the myth around the historical personality being read as a kind of suffering the Portuguese insist on inflicting on themselves), the violence of the war cannot be seen by spectators, who are only allowed to contemplate the horror expressed in the soldier's eye. The eye is symptomatically the only part left uncovered by bandages around his head, and the long close-up on the soldier's face summarizes the shocking horror of the conflict and the inevitable fragility of men towards the proximity of death.

14 In sum, the two films under analysis, through different strategies centered on the management and/or the deconstruction of the tenets of the New State's ideological machine, of the visibility/invisibility of war violence and of the aestheticization of silence constitute eloquent responses to António Lobo Antunes's question quoted at the beginning of this essay. More than a response, the films are ingenious exercises of remediation that leave new traces on the memories of the Colonial War, so that present and future generations can definitively refuse the national vain glory of command.

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Filmography

A Costa dos Murmúrios. 2004. Dir. Margarida Cardoso. Lisboa Filme.

Natal 71. 1999. Dir. Margarida Cardoso. Filmes do Tejo and IPACA.

Non, ou a Vã Glória de Mandar. 1990. Dir. Manoel de Oliveira. Madragoa Filmes.

Notes

1 Since it was not possible to find the English version of the book (*South of Nowhere: A Novel*, trans. Elizabeth Lowe, New York: Random House, 1983), the translation is my own. For the Portuguese version, see Antunes 1979.

2 According to Margarida Ribeiro, the regime’s attempt to distort/obliterate the truth about the Colonial War is illustrated by the fact that photos related to the conflict in Africa (mainly of embarkments and disembarkments) disappear from Portuguese newspapers in the late 1960s. “África no Feminino: As Mulheres Portuguesas e a Guerra Colonial”, *Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais*, 68, Abril de 2004, 26.

3 Stuart Allan & Barbie Zelizer, “Rules of Engagement: Journalism and War”, in *Reporting War. Journalism in Wartime*, London and New York: Routledge, 2004, 19.

4 Astrid Erll, “Literature, Film, and the Mediality of Cultural Memory”, in Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nünning & Sarah Young (eds.), *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2008, 389.

5 I am borrowing the expression “child of war” from Ribeiro et al. (forthcoming) in a clear reference to their research project on the children of the Colonial War. On the project see <<http://www.ces.uc.pt/projectos/filhosdaguerracolonial/pages/introen.php>>.

6 Here I refer to Cardoso’s statements during the interview she gave together with Lídia Jorge to Ana de Sousa Dias (see the “extras” in the dvd version of the film), and during her visit to the Faculty of Human Sciences of the Portuguese Catholic University in December 2009. It is worth mentioning that in 1999 Cardoso tried to break this silence enveloping the memories of the Colonial War when she directed the documentary *Natal 71* (Christmas 71). In this film Cardoso discusses how the State and the organizations that supported it (in this case, the MNF, Movimento Nacional Feminino [the National Women’s Movement]) gave moral support to soldiers who were fighting in the Portuguese African colonies. *Natal 71* was a record with songs, jokes and messages sent by Portuguese public figures (artists, soccer players, among others), which was distributed among 300,000 soldiers in order to bring them psychological relief and “affection” during the 1971 Christmas period. The problem was that most soldiers could not listen to the record since they were in isolated areas where there was no electricity or a phonograph, which shows the deficiencies of State support.

7 In her novel Jorge focuses on the experience of officers’ wives who are left alone after their husbands leave for the battlefield. Jorge’s perspective thus highlights these women’s daily lives and how the latter are shaped by the war.

8 In the Portuguese Army, an *alferes* occupies a rank immediately inferior to that of a lieutenant.

9 Carlos Fabião, Luís Krus & Rui Ramos, “A visão do passado em *Non, ou a Vã Glória de Mandar* de Manoel de Oliveira”, in *Penélope. Fazer e desfazer a História*, Lisboa, 6, 1991, 173.

10 Mark Sabine, “Putting Violence back in the Picture: Margarida Cardoso’s ‘A Costa dos Murmúrios’ and Postcolonial War Amnesia”, in Helena Silva et al. (eds.), *Conflict, Memory Transfers and the Reshaping of Europe*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010, 291, 294.

11 Evita and her husband lived in Stella Maris Hotel, a former luxury hotel where businessmen lodged and met during the glorious period of the empire. During the Colonial War, the hotel was converted into quarters for soldiers and their families. This is a key space both in Jorge’s novel and Cardoso’s film since the private life of families and their conflicts are seen and heard through the divisions between or inside the rooms adapted to lodge the soldiers’ families.

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