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## Lusophone Cinemas in Transnational Perspective

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If imperialist domination has the vital need to practice cultural oppression, national liberation is necessarily an act of culture.

Amílcar Cabral<sup>3</sup>

The past will have been worked through only when the causes of what happened then have been eliminated. Only because the causes continue to exist does the captivating spell of the past remain to this day unbroken.

Theodor Adorno<sup>4</sup>

### Abstract

*Lusophone Cinemas in Transnational Perspective*: Although still plagued by a form of lingering invisibility the various Lusophone cinemas are beginning to attract more and more critical attention as attested by a number of recent studies. This essay argues for a transnational perspective that eschews both the narrow confines of a national and nationalist understanding, as well as the fantasy of a global cinema that at present is still fairly split between a hegemonic Hollywoodesque form and an easily exoticized would-be alternative cinema. Consequently it calls for analysis centered on the interrelated questions of hybridism, memory and postmemory, as well as violence.

‘Everyone who has cold hands / Should put them in the troughs’. That is how Fernando Pessoa begins one of his most irreverent poems, sent to Ophelia Queiroz on the 29 September 1929. I am using his ten troughs to present some brief notes on Lusophone cinemas in the present day and age. In the first place, before putting my hands in any of the troughs, and there won’t be ten but just half that number, I should like to point out that despite all the difficulties that still persist in relation to studying contemporary Lusophone cinema, I believe we are on the threshold of a phase of great potential with the recent publication of various works and individual studies that promise a critical look at many aspects of these different cinemas which have been practically ignored up to now. In addition to essays or individual articles I refer specifically to the following publications: *Lusophone Africa: Beyond*

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<sup>3</sup> Amílcar Cabral, *History Is a Weapon: National Liberation and Culture* (20 February 1970).

<sup>4</sup> Theodor Adorno [1959], ‘The Meaning of Working Through the Past’, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 89-103. <<https://signale.cornell.edu/text/meaning-working-through-past>>

*Independence* by Fernando Arenas (2011); the themed number of the *Journal of African Cinemas* dedicated to Luso-African Cinema (2012); *Identity and Difference: Postcoloniality and Transnationality in Lusophone Films* by Carolin Overhoff Ferreira (2012); the second, updated edition of *O Cinema Português através dos seus filmes* organized by Carolin Overhoff Ferreira (2007; 2014); and *Migration in Lusophone Cinema*, organized by Cacilda Rêgo and Marcus Brasileiro (2014). Perhaps the relative invisibility of the Lusophone cinemas that has been one of their essential paradoxes is a thing of the past, or is at least being challenged.

My first point, to which I shall return, concerns the need to view the cinemas from a transnational perspective. This is not a simple opposition between national and transnational cinema. I am even less interested in the notion of a global system, since, in the current system of cultural production, the fantasy of a global cinema can be divided into two strands, both of them extremely problematic for reasons that are all too obvious: on the one hand, a hegemonic cinema, produced largely in the US and consumed avidly by practically the entire world; on the other hand, a supposedly alternative cinema in which the label ‘world’ acts mainly as a euphemism for exotic, in a vaguely liberal attempt to ease the bad conscience of the western world at no great cost, either economic or ethical. In the case of the Angolan and Mozambican cinemas, in their initial phase, either as an instrument of propaganda and clarification, or as a key element in constructing the postcolonial nation, one can speak of national cinemas. In the case of both Brazil and Portugal, such a designation becomes far more difficult. Even if one thinks of the early cinema of the 1930s and ’40s, closely linked to the regime’s propaganda purposes, the designation ‘national’ is relative. At the beginning of the twentieth century, neither Brazil nor Portugal needed to use the cinema as the privileged means to promote national unity in the same way as Angola and Mozambique. Obviously, if the main criterion was capitalization, one could speak of the cinema of that period, before the advent of the part funding at European or world level on which Portugal depends and which also takes on importance in Brazil, as can be read in the information about ‘Cinema do Brasil’ [Brazilian Cinema], a state-private partnership to promote the dissemination of Brazilian cinema:

Brazil strongly encourages international co-productions, and has bilateral agreements with Argentina, Canada, Chile, France, India, Italy, Germany, Spain, Portugal and Venezuela, and is also a signatory to multilateral treaties, such as the Ibero-American Film Integration, and the Latin-American Film Co-production Agreements. Brazil is

also a member of the Ibermedia programme ([www.programaibermedia.com](http://www.programaibermedia.com)). In addition, there are 3 annual programmes to support co-productions with Argentina, Portugal and the region of Galicia, in Spain; each one of them supports 4 films per year. (Cinema do Brasil)

But clearly, many other factors predominate in the cinema of Portugal and Brazil, just as it would be a mistake to continue to view the cinemas of Angola and Mozambique as primarily national productions. I suggest, for now, that the Lusophone cinemas should be understood as transnational cinemas, on the basis of their funding, the choice of actors, the profile of the film makers who themselves are often transnational, and further, in the way they criticise and problematise their respective societies and dialogue with other films and literary works. Consider, for example, the density of the name 'Judith' used by one of the characters in the film *O Herói* [The Hero] by Zézé Gamboa, referring both to the avenging figure of the Bible as, when he explains to Vitório that 'Judith is a nom de guerre', he is alluding directly to Almeida Negreiros' eponymous novel.

My second point concerns the question of the hybridism that runs through many Lusophone films and should not be confused with questions of Lusophony, or even less with late, rotten Luso-tropicalism. Perhaps this is an unnecessary point. Even so, I think a certain vigilance is needed if we are not to let ourselves be lulled by false notions of community. The various Lusophone countries have much in common given the violent history of Portuguese imperialism and colonialism. But there are also radical differences between them and even inside themselves. At the same time I want to avoid facile and destructive cynicism. If the imaginary of official Lusophony is never far from neo-colonial intentions and damaging nostalgia for a lost supposed grandeur, I believe that on a personal level many authors, actors, directors and intellectuals in the different countries where Portuguese is an official language share common aims in relation to the challenges that they constantly face, given the contempt shown by contemporary societies for most culture, despite constantly asserting the opposite. Thus, the question of solidarity, against all the stereotypes of the politicians, is an incessant quest that is shared whether it involves a film like *Tabu* [Taboo] by Miguel Gomes or *O Herói* [The Hero] by Zézé Gamboa, or *Virgem Margarida* [Virgin Margarida] by Licínio Azevedo. The hybridism to which I am referring is not based on so-called 'brandos costumes'

[gentle ways],<sup>5</sup> and even less on any idyllic miscegenation without the least historical basis. Nor is it just one more privilege of a cultural elite that allows itself the luxury of choosing difference as the standard of their own assumed superiority. The hybridism I believe to be a fundamental element of the Lusophone cinemas is related to the historical and material conditions of the different countries, their societies and the constant cultural transfers, despite all the imbalances in the power relations inherent to colonialism and its effects.

Third point: one of the characteristics I want to position as central for an understanding of the Lusophone cinemas in a transnational perspective is memory, in other words, the work of memory carried out by so many films from the different countries. This point may seem paradoxical, since the work of memory is often intended directly or indirectly to construct or modify models of the concept of nation. However, I believe that the two positions, instead of being mutually exclusive, are complementary. That is, the work of memory carried out by films like *A Costa dos Murmúrios* [The Murmuring Coast] or *Virgem Margarida* is simultaneously a reflection on the national identity of Portugal and Mozambique respectively, and it transcends the limits of the nation since the effects of the colonial war on Portugal are no exception, just as the effects of the ideological dogmatism intrinsic to the period immediately following independence also are not unique or restricted to Mozambique. I am aware that these two examples are just that, simply examples. But I have chosen them because I believe they are a clear illustration of the multiple ways in which this work of memory is effected and how both of the films, notwithstanding all of their differences, radically question and problematise the concept of nation at the same time as they establish a bridge for the national past to be understood by the generations of the present. Because they both deal with collective traumas, this work of memory even more radically offers the possibility of reconstructing the image of the nation, but does it in such a way as to insert the nation, whether it is Portugal or Mozambique, into a broader plane that transcends nationalism. *A Costa dos Murmúrios*, following the novel of the same title by Lídia Jorge, is a film that problematises the concept of history and memory. The official History is criticised, as is the subjectivity inherent to memory, the narrow link between memory and forgetfulness; they are presented as counterpoints that open up a space for critical reflection. Margarida Cardoso's film, even more than Lídia Jorge's novel, in part because it is a film, in part due to the passage of time so necessary to be able to process a

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<sup>5</sup> A phrase associated with the Estado Novo, on a par with the myth of Luso-tropicalism. For discussion of the concept, see Sabine, Lovers, not fighters Left politics and 'brandos costumes' in 'Capitães de Abril', *Journal of Romance Studies*, 16:2 (Summer 2016), 12-35.

collective trauma of the magnitude of the colonial war, has allowed a new generation to discuss the national past, the present of a previous generation that even today is decisive for the national identity. But by highlighting the colonial war the film also serves to remind us that the national condition is never just the national condition. If Portuguese society only now stops viewing the question of the war as taboo in the public sphere, in the case of a film like *Virgem Margarida*, it is obvious how Mozambican society has other problems, other taboos, to consider. However, even if the question of the re-education camps may seem exclusively Mozambican, or at most limited to those countries whose governments have adopted some Maoist tendencies, not to mention China, the more general question of the establishment of camps in the colonial context as well as in the context of the Holocaust (even considering all the differences), implies the need for a transnational theorisation. That is, although *Virgem Margarida* questions a unique situation in a specific national context which was the attempt to create the 'new woman', it opens up the possibility of a much broader questioning of the relationship between ideology and state violence or the imbalance in the power relations between men and women that by no means disappeared at the magical moment of independence or the return to parliamentary democracy in the wake of decolonization.

Fourth point: Violence is an important element to be considered in the Lusophone cinemas. While one might generally say that all of the films are more or less violent, given the function of the representation and the image, I believe it is important to note how in some, not all of the great films of the Lusophone cinemas, violence is never represented in a traditional or rash manner. I wish to be clear, the films I have mentioned by way of example are films of great violence, at different levels. They are films that deal with situations of war and the post-war period. They are films that attempt to process collective and personal traumas. They are films that are still directly or indirectly related to the systematic violence of the colonial regime. And yet they are films in which physical violence is deflected and even, on occasion, almost absent. For example, in *A Costa dos Murmúrios*, the violence is depicted as if at second hand, the dead who are piled up in the streets are never seen, the military combat would be in the north and never even takes place, only domestic violence seems to surface from time to time, in the fights heard through walls or the brutal gestures of captain Forza Leal towards his wife. In *Virgem Margarida* some punishments inflicted on the women prisoners in the re-education camp are clearly extremely violent, like being buried alive, with only one's head above the surface. But the rape of the young Margarida happens off camera. Violence is a constant feature of the two films to the point where one might say that violence is a principal factor in the respective societies, the Angolan and the Portuguese, in the

colonial period, just like Mozambican society after independence. But both films explicitly reject any gratuitous use of violence for voyeuristic ends. The same might be said of Portugal in the case of a film like *Tabu* where the silent violence of daily mediocrity and hopelessness on the periphery of Lisbon is exposed unmercifully. Or, similarly, in a film like *O Herói*, despite there being scenes of direct physical violence, the criticism of the futility of war, even war supposedly fought to save the nation, could not be more obvious. Or, to mention a recent documentary, *Cabralista*, one of the key points is the emphasis placed on culture in the construction of a free nation, in contrast, one might say, with the use of armed struggle, which even if necessary, is never exalted. Of course, this attitude towards violence is not shared by all Lusophone films, nor would it make sense. What I want to stress is the way that some Lusophone films reject a traditional depiction of violence at the same time as they denounce systematic violence as a kind of malignant legacy of colonialism.

Fifth point: In addition to the question of memory, it is important to conceptualise the notion of postmemory, in Marianne Hirsch's (1997) designation, in the sphere of Lusophone cinemas. This because in many cases the films in question, when they revisit the past, make use not only of memory but also of postmemory, since the public they address is largely a younger public that cannot have any memories of events prior to their own lives. What this public does have is postmemory, in the case of having grown up with family stories about the different wars and other traumatic events, or even no memory at all, given the silence that is sometimes the only way of allowing victims of trauma to survive. Just like memory, postmemory is complex. To illustrate this point I would like to refer briefly to two films: *Tabu* by Miguel Gomes and *Cabralista* by Val Lopes. These are very different films, though not complete opposites. While *Tabu* is a fictional film, *Cabralista* is a documentary. The first is a production of enormous complexity and great technical sophistication, including the use of black and white film and an intertextual relationship with the history of cinema and the very dense film of the same name by Friedrich Murnau. The second is a film with more limited means, though it does make use of recent digital techniques and has important biographical content. Both deal with diaspora though in quite different ways and opposite contexts, since in *Tabu* it is Europeans who move to Africa, while in *Cabralista* the diaspora is that of a young man of Cape Verdean extraction born in Luxembourg. In the case of *Tabu*, the question of postmemory is external. In other words, as fiction the film evokes a memory process of various characters in respect of their lives as young people in Africa. But that memory is obviously a fiction. What is not a fiction is the postmemory of the young people who watch the film and may perhaps have heard episodes narrated that are similar to those

that the films shows them and which perhaps for the first time lets them give substance in images, even fictional ones, to what that past might have been. The spectre of nostalgia is a problem to which I shall return. On the one hand, in *Cabralista* we are made aware of the postmemory of the young director – or his alter-ego to avoid establishing too close a relationship between Val Lopes the director and the character who narrates most of the film – who is made known to us. The tension between present and past is obvious. In some ways the discovery of the African past, and of the intellectual importance of a figure like Amílcar Cabral, are presented as forming an individual process of growth and socio-political awareness; but also as a way of dealing with the disadvantages of a present marked by being a migrant in a country like Luxembourg. Or as the protagonist admits, the replacement of his feeling of shame at being black in Luxembourg by a feeling of pride in African traditions. This attitude, which has the aim of raising awareness among young people, is also a stance in relation to the Europe that continues to be problematic but must be understood as the result of the increasingly excluding processes of ‘fortress Europe’ which, though essentially contradictory, are no less real. Postmemory may allow the new generations a means of relating to a past that still marks and shocks them but of which they have practically no knowledge. That is a positive aspect. But it may also serve to mythify certain aspects of the past, to block others or even to obliterate some crucial points of that past which appear less important at the moment.

Sixth point: If one of the main functions of the Lusophone cinemas in this phase is the work of memory, we should bear in mind the threat of nostalgia. In many films there is not even a minimum aftertaste of nostalgia. The critical capacity of *A Costa dos Murmúrios* never fades into a desire to return to the past. Moreover, the figure of Eva is implacable towards her younger version, Evita, and in her marriage to the fiancé she longed for who is also presented as overshadowed by the systematic and even epistemic violence embodied in the figure of captain Forza Leal whose imperialist version of reality Eva tries to oppose. Even the figure of resistance of the journalist is not idealised but presented as a typical male figure in an extremely patriarchal society. Nor is there any nostalgia in *Virgem Margarida*. The physical and ideological violence to which all of the women are subjected, both the prisoners being ‘re-educated’ and their captors, examples of young women framed in a system that still reproduces, even if differently, the parameters of the same patriarchy that it should supposedly combat, is never idealised or even attenuated or excused. Unlike Margarida Cardoso’s film, Lícínio Azevedo’s film has a supposedly happy ending when it shows the two groups of women united in the awareness of having both freed themselves from the male



yoke that dominated them all. This ending is ambiguous, complex and perhaps too problematic. In the first place, no matter how closely the film is based on reality or the indisputable experience of those women who lived through such situations, it exploits the rape of Margarida in order to allow an ending of promised solidarity. Furthermore, Margarida had already been subjected to another violent practice, the virginity test carried out by one of the older women in the camp in the presence of a group of women. Unlike the violence at the end of the film, which is not filmed, in this case the violence inflicted on Margarida is represented directly. For now I simply point to the need to undertake an analysis of questions of gender and violence in these films. But I will allow myself to observe that perhaps the reason for the difference between the two scenes is important because if there is a conscious decision to avoid images of sexual violence, the apparent ‘naturalness’ of the virginity test – and the way that women are still subject to profound conditioning to patriarchal logic – seems to indicate a lack of critical awareness of the various forms of violence inflicted on those women in practices that still survive today (Bagnol 2012). However, my point is that despite this lack of critical consciousness raising, the film does try to point to the possibility of a different, freer future, and never supposes any return to the past which is revisited in such a way as to clarify elements of the history of the nation building that many would prefer to forget.

The same cannot be said of other films which slide more or less easily towards nostalgia either as a kind of joke or because they provide a ‘blind point’ in the actual motivation for remembering the past. Two opposing examples: one, the film *Tabu* by Miguel Gomes, the other, Val Lopes’s documentary *Cabralista*, which I have already mentioned briefly, also in relation to one another. In the case of *Tabu*, the Portuguese colonial past is evoked as a ‘Paradise Lost’, the actual title of that section of the film. There is nothing ingenuous in Miguel Gomes’s film and it is obvious that this is a game of seduction with the actual seduction of past and unrecoverable youth, especially in contrast to an everyday reality that verges on misery. The reality of a depressing present is everywhere and affects everyone, whether it is Aurora’s dementia and her lordly attitude to the very end despite all the feelings of guilt that never have anything to do with the crimes of the historical situation but only with her own story of love and betrayal, or the fate of the old ladies’ man, Mr. Ventura, parked in an old people’s home. From a strictly cinematographic point of view, many of the options chosen by Gomes can be justified, including this more or less joking slide towards nostalgia, since it is one of the fundamental elements of the Friedrich Murnau film of the same name (1931) where, too, despite the intention of criticising western intervention in the paradise lost

that was the South Pacific, there is a whole load of nostalgia for a past that can never be recovered. I have already had occasion to examine this situation, which I call post-imperial nostalgia, in greater depth (Medeiros, 2016) so will limit myself here to simply invoking Adorno's words in one of his entries in the *Minima Moralia* (2005; original German work published in 1951) that describes the absurd paradox of such a situation and can be applied equally to Gomes's film, when he tells us that the 'circle of bourgeois nostalgia for naivety' (*Sehnsucht*) (2005: 170) is the search for and idealisation of a past that she herself has destroyed. In Gomes's case, despite all the parodic problematization of the colonial process and the illusions of this process, the possibility of having this ultimately very bourgeois desire to recapture a certain innocence remains in suspension. As a cinematographic game, its multiplicity of criss-crossing referents is a fascinating strategy. As a film consumed by a young generation, itself oppressed by the subalternity imposed by Portugal's uneven development and by the limitless crisis of unbridled capitalism, this love affair with nostalgia is extremely dangerous, not to say irresponsible.

In the case of *Cabralista*, despite also having available a whole series of intertextual references, both visual and auditory, and manipulating them quite appropriately, particularly in view of their aim of enticing young people to join a movement – or way of thinking – namely 'Cabralism', the slide towards nostalgia, far from constituting an intellectual game, is more the effect of the desire for postcolonial affirmation that involves identification with a certain image of the past held up as an example for the present and especially as guidance for the future. First of all I hasten to say that I consider the motivation of the documentary, as a work of memory aimed at recovering the legacy of Amílcar Cabral, to be extremely necessary. I also admit that some aspects may have a generational appeal that escapes me, despite, or perhaps because of the affirmation that Cabralism is an intergenerational state of mind. However, in his eagerness to create a model image of Amílcal Cabral for the present day, Lopes ends up giving way to a mythification of the figure of Cabral that is disturbing, whether it is represented in the glorifying images of Cabral's statue or the photographs of him in a frame of flames that blaze without burning – a representation of the spirit? But the spirit, and mainly its representation as a flame, has a whole, highly problematic tradition – or even in the multiple references to Cabral as the hero, a designation that Zézé Gamboa's film completely deconstructs but which reappears here in an ingenuous form. This is not precisely the case of the bourgeois circle of nostalgia, but it is one of its results.

In conclusion, I would like to restate the importance of the Lusophone cinemas in the current global situation and their capacity to innovate and create notwithstanding all the

market conditions from which they can obviously never escape. Furthermore, Adorno's observation that the spell of the past persists because the conditions of oppression that characterise that past have not yet been eliminated continues to be more relevant today than ever before. I believe it is important to note how, despite all these very real constraints, it is still possible for a group of artists and intellectuals to assume the freedom to think the cinema and to think the function of cinema in society, free from nationalist preconceptions but without universalist illusions. And I want to emphasise the privilege it is to be able to continue to study these practical lessons in cosmopolitan citizenship that we are continually given by the transnational Lusophone cinemas.

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