



FILHOS DE IMPÉRIO E PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS
CHILDREN OF EMPIRES AND EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES
ENFANTS D'EMPIRES ET POSTMÉMOIRES EUROPÉENNES

Saturday, 6 July 2019



The Bedroom in English | 2015 | [Tatiana Macedo](#) (courtesy of the artist)

SCENES OF COLONIAL MEMORY: DECAY AND THE RUINS OF MACAU

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Decay is not just one shade of a certain stripe of modernity. It is also a way of looking, with hindsight, at a charged and potent past: the irremovable stain of decay to which Frantz Fanon referred in the context of the war in Algeria. Decay therefore assumes the form of a taut relationship between the present and the past. It can also be inscribed within a dynamic of the transmission of the past, in which the communication of experienced memory is altered. This too is a profound reformulation. Memory degrades and almost loses its power of representation: identification with an emptied past brought close to extinction becomes impossible.



Ivo M. Ferreira, director of 2016's *Cartas da guerra*, is particularly attuned to the theme of the problematic memory of Portuguese colonialism. His new film, *Hotel Império* (1) has profound decay in Macau as its backdrop. The film, coproduced between Portugal and China, presents an acute conflict between temporalities, cultures, spaces and languages. The idealization of a Sino-Portuguese interculturality, embedded in a profound exchange between the two cultures, disintegrates. But the film exposes, above all, a mute conflict between generations which exist on autonomous and irreducible planes.

At stake is the destiny – we cannot say the future – of a decrepit hotel belonging to a sick old Portuguese man. Its guests are the marginalized of the city. The protagonist is Maria, the daughter of the owner, who tries to save the remains of the structure: the controversial, familial residue of the past. She leaves no stone unturned in her efforts, even putting herself up for sale. The hotel is situated in the Chinese part of the city. It gathers a microcosm of the social world, precisely captured by a director attending closely to light and shade, and an aesthetics dominated by the nocturnal. The popular world – gravely threatened by property speculation – is revealed through fine details.

Beyond the name itself of the hotel – Império [Empire] – what is interesting is to account for the allegory suggested between the idea of Portugal's colonial past (that in Asia ephemerally and precociously constituted an empire) and the present represented by the ruins of an improbable imperial building on the brink of ruin. The play of allegorical details put forward in the film's images is significant: the room of the father, Gustavo, houses a portrait of Camões; a Portuguese guitar lies in a corner; Maria sings fado in the famous floating casino. These are the bits of evidence – perhaps stereotypical, but powerful – which accompany the emergence of the historical allegory of the hotel/Portugal. Both are sunk in a problematic present not only in material terms, but above all in terms of ideas: one anachronistic idea. Allegories, as Walter Benjamin argued in his work on *Trauerspiels*, represent in discourse, in the realm of thought, what ruins do in the realm of the material.

Decay affects the world of objects, but also reaches into the world of ideas and narratives about the past. What ignites the plot and the overwhelming decay that dominates the film is a symbolic retreat into the past enabled by an enigmatic and mixed figure: Chu. Chu is Chinese and Portuguese, obsessed with Maria and with the hotel. In truth, this retreat is a regression. The time in which it happens is itself symbolic: exactly twenty years after the end of official Portuguese sovereignty in the Chinese territory of Macau.



Chu conjoins traces of alterity and familiarity, of the self and the other. He is, in fact, Maria's half-brother. He returns to claim his half of the Império. A central scene, that led to the odd classification of the film as an "exotic thriller", is the humiliating exposure and offering up of the sister's body. The scene deploys one of the characteristic traits of the film in the use of literary and cultural references. In this scene it is a reference to a somewhat similar situation in the novel *Campo de sangue* by Dulce Maria Cardoso. There are also mythological references to the classical myth of the same-but-different brothers Castor and Polux, two twins conceived by different fathers. These references thicken the plot with the tragic and the intertextual. Indeed, a certain tragic air pervades the whole structure of the film.

What is important to highlight, however, is how *Hotel Império* redefines the obstinate and irreducible problematic of the transmission of intergenerational memory within the context of decay. In the film, the conventional metaphor of inheritance is dissected in order to show its substantively concealed and subjective side, which corresponds to the differentiated attitude of those called upon to receive the (here, negative) inheritance of the past. A singular inheritance – that of the Hotel Império – produces two opposite and contradictory responses: on the one hand to secure a line of family legacy (the case of Maria); on the other to destroy that same hereditary line with a brutal *damnatio memoriae*; a vengeance from the new generation (Chu) against the old.

There is a contradiction at the heart of this. The semantic polymorphism of how memory is projected from one generation onto another means memories taken on from previous generations can realize themselves in different ways. It elicits a conflict over the difficult and uncertain future of the remains of family memory. Fittingly for a time of decay, even as the (pessimistic) denouement unfolds, this conflict remains unresolved.

What remains of the Hotel Império, beyond an Asian allegory of Portugal? The clustered ruins of a building evoke the memory of an ancient, faded splendour which survives only in residues. But it is more an aesthetic image than a documented, known fact. Haunted ghosts survive of a house, more imagined than real, that never fully belonged in a Macau now disputing its precarious future through an iniquitous debate with a crushing and soulless modernization. The ideal conditions, then, to open up space for a pungent and inexorable nostalgia. It is destined to be the only thing to remain.



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(1) The film was made in 2018 and was released in Portuguese cinemas in May 2019.

Translated by Archie Davies

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MEMOIRS is funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (no. 648624) and is hosted at the Centre for Social Studies (CES), University of Coimbra.

