

MEMORY'S RANSOM: SILENCES, POSTMEMORY, CINEMA

O RESGATE DA MEMÓRIA: SILÊNCIOS, PÓS-MEMÓRIA, CINEMA

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ABSTRACT

Close to half a century after their end, the colonial wars Portugal waged in a desperate and doomed attempt to hold on to its African colonies in 1974 remain still largely unprocessed. This article examines the multiple silences surrounding the colonial wars and the 25th April Revolution in Portugal drawing from the concept of postmemory and the notion of a traumatic past whose wounds have never healed. It argues that silence in the end does nothing more than allow those open wounds to go on festering. The combined silence over the dictatorship and the colonial wars was never more than a mild palliative, yet another self-delusion the nation allowed itself as it attempted to put on its new European costume. The article focuses on two films, Inês de Medeiros' *Cartas a uma Ditadura* (2006) and Ivo M. Ferreira's *Cartas da Guerra* (2016), their differences and their similarities, singling out the work of postmemory evident in the scenes with Belmira Monteiro and her granddaughter in the former.

KEYWORDS: Postmemory, Film, Silence, Revolution, Colonial War

RESUMO

Passados quase cinquenta anos depois do seu fim em 1974, as guerras coloniais que Portugal travou em África numa tentativa desesperada e condenada ao fracasso de assegurar o domínio das suas colónias, continuam ainda por processar devidamente. Este artigo examina os silêncios múltiplos ao redor das guerras coloniais e da Revolução de 25 de Abril em Portugal a partir do conceito de pós-memória e da noção de um passado traumático cujas chagas nunca sararam. Avança a sugestão de o silêncio manter essas feridas em aberto. O silêncio combinado que recaiu sobre a ditadura e as guerras

coloniais nunca foi mais que um paliativo suave, mais uma das ilusões que a nação se permitiu para melhor vestir o seu novo traje Europeu. Este artigo debruça-se sobre dois filmes, Inês de Medeiros' *Cartas a uma Ditadura* (2006) e Ivo M. Ferreira's *Cartas da Guerra* (2016), as suas diferenças e semelhanças, salientando o trabalho de pós-memória evidente nas cenas do primeiro em que Belmira Monteiro figura com a sua neta.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Pós-memória, Filme, Silêncio, Revolução, Guerra Colonial

“The past is never dead. It's not even past”

William Faulkner

Close to half a century after their end, the colonial wars Portugal waged in a desperate and doomed attempt to hold on to its African colonies in 1974 remain still largely unprocessed. Even if they no longer constitute a kind of national taboo, and have been frankly addressed in an ever-growing number of artistic, literary, and even cinematic representations, to which one must add a few works of historical and critical interpretation, the colonial wars still tend to be surrounded by silence. And even if one cannot speak of anything like Spain's tacit 'Pacto del Olvido' [pact of forgetting], whereby Spain's elites on both sides of the political spectrum after the death of Franco agreed to 'forget' the regime's atrocities (ENCARNACION, 2014), nonetheless it is as if there was indeed a pact of silence among all in Portugal, regarding the colonial wars. Perhaps society was less divided than in Spain, after all Portugal's civil war had already happened in the nineteenth century and not in the twentieth, and Salazar's regime, in spite of constant opposition, was only ever really threatened by the elections of 1958 and the challenge mounted by the charismatic General Humberto Delgado. Or perhaps it was the fact that 1974 marked not just the end of the colonial wars but also the end of the dictatorship and that both are intrinsically connected, to the point that one can see them interchangeably as both cause and effect of each other. So that in fact, to the silence over the colonial wars, one must add the silence over the fascist past (RIBEIRO, 2016). The fatuous argument over the regime's proper designation as fascist or merely authoritarian, or the myth of a benevolent and cordial people, often serving as nothing more than polite curtains to mask the generalized silence about what really mattered: a confrontation with the spiral of violence and subsequent trauma across decades that left nothing and no one untouched.

Not just one silence then, but multiple, overlapping, silences. One can think that those silences were necessary. Not only because in the construction of any national narrative, there is always an implicit agreement on what must be remembered and what forgotten, indeed that no form of remembering is ever possible without a certain amount of forgetting. Above

all, it may seem as if the very survival of the nation depended on forgetting much more than remembering. Surviving in its newly reduced state as one of the smallest, impoverished, and inconsequential European states, Portugal needed desperately to hang on to its delusion of empire firmly anchored in a remote past that could hardly be subject to scrutiny in spite of, or even because of, its instrumentalization through the propaganda of the Estado Novo. In a sense, the nation's elites had never really been able to shake off the nagging sense of inferiority inherited from the famous 19th century 'Geração de 70' and 1974 had to be portrayed, cost what it may, as a glorious new assertion of Portugal as a kind of vanguard in the search for freedom, equality, and justice. To avoid any possible misinterpretations, let me hasten to add that, without a shadow of a doubt, the revolution of 25 April 1974 did mark an important milestone on a number of registers. For one, regardless of all that went wrong afterwards, it did represent the point of transition to a post-imperial Europe, which, even if this in itself remains highly problematic. The desire to propagate this view of Portugal then, no longer the sick man of Europe but the harbinger of a new Europe, in which a hardened dictatorship could be toppled virtually without spilling a drop of blood could not face up to all its imperial and fascist ghosts. The armed forces were still the same armed forces that had fought the colonial wars of course, but their image as the successful brokers of democracy and freedom was not only equally true but, above all, much easier to adhere to, especially as it offered a kind of balm, temporary though it might be, to soothe the raw wounds of the past forty odd years.

Except that silence in the end does nothing more than allow those open wounds to go on festering. The combined silence over the dictatorship and the colonial wars was never more than a mild palliative, yet another self-delusion the nation allowed itself as it attempted to put on its new European costume. Abandoning not only the dictatorship's noxious rhetoric about a pluricontinental nation but also refusing to confront its own complicities, its enduring if ever denied racism, and its sense of being an insignificant pawn in a game of strategy at the end of the cold war. A game, moreover, the rules of which it never quite understood, let alone mastered, even as it tried to profit from them too, by pulling its card as founding member of NATO and the strategic position in mid-Atlantic of the Azores. Should anyone need a reminder of that, just look at the infamous photo of Durão Barroso with Aznar, Bush, and Blair at the 'moment of truth' summit at the Azores on 16 March 2003 that, as we all came to know, was rather a moment of 'untruth' as Bush, seconded by Blair and only eagerly followed by Aznar and Durão Barroso pretended to 'show his cards' (to throw Bush's own words at him) and announced basically the inevitability of his decision to go to war against Iraq, the consequences of which are still being played today.² In *Present Pasts* Andreas Huyssen carefully and convincingly argues for a view of our present as having undergone a radical change in its relationship to the past due to the overwhelming medialization of all aspects of life: "[u]ntold recent and

not so recent pasts impinge upon the present through modern media of reproduction like photography, film, recorded music, and the Internet ...” (HUYSSSEN, 2003, p. 1). Without wanting to contest this in any way, nonetheless I would like to observe that although Portuguese society is no exception to this, when it comes to the memory of both fascism and the colonial wars in Portugal, it is rather the opposite that prevails. Instead of an overflow of images and other representations of both the dictatorship and the wars, or even of the revolution, the accumulation of silences seems to also extend to the mimetic realm. So that a confrontation with the past is still waiting to happen. And with every year that passes it becomes more difficult to achieve. Not only because it will always be painful but because those same silences that have been tacitly assumed by most have also allowed for a resurgence of noxious positions on nationalism, on fascism, on the figure of the dictator, or even that of the worst forms of oppression that cannot even be said to be returning or surging as they have always been present, even if muted.

Almost fifty years after the revolution its memory would also seem ready to be consigned to the dustbin, as the constant attempts to rewrite history, deny the revolution's merits, and whitewash the dictatorship, can be said to have started the day after the regime fell and have only been increasing in strength. Silence, rather than allowing a traumatized society to heal has done its opposite, the old wounds have only continued to fester and the ghosts have become ever thirsty for more blood. On the forgetting of the revolution and the silencing of both the colonial war as well as the dictatorship, Manuel Loff suggestively concludes that “[l]iberation from oppression came as a direct result from a conflict the Portuguese cannot explain, because they do not employ the necessary concepts” (LOFF, 2010, p. 121). This, however, raises the question as to why they did not. Certainly not out of ignorance, in spite of nearly fifty years of depoliticization, forced migration, censorship, and large-scale state violence. By placing the revolution in international context Raquel Varela is able to add an important consideration. As she says, “The Carnation Revolution was the last European revolution to call into question private property of the means of production (...) and it terrified the rich and the mighty. (...) Today this revolutionary past – when the poorest, most fragile, often illiterate, have dared to take life in their hands – is a kind of historical nightmare of the current Portuguese ruling classes” (VARELA, 2019, pp. 267-269). The need to erase the memory of the revolution then, must be seen as one of the key reasons for the overlapping silences. And yet, the obvious nightmare is rather the legacy of the dictatorship and its attendant cruelty. A common inheritance of the Portuguese, the memory of the Revolution actually must be seen, as Varela argues, as a memory of what was possible in Europe at the end of the twentieth century, a signal for hope in the possibility of a better, more dignified, future (VARELA, 2019) that shall endure, even if only as an inheritance of shadows (MEDEIROS, 2020).

At this point it might be useful to consider an observation by Andreas Huyssen in relation to W. G. Sebald, Germany's past, silence, and

repression: “Rather than generating silence, as we have learned from Foucault, repression generates discourse. The scarcity of literary texts about the bombings [of German cities], and it certainly contrasts with the fact that there always was a lot of talk about the bombings in postwar Germany” (HUYSSSEN, 2003, p. 147). Most probably Huysssen has in mind Foucault’s discussion of the “Repressive Hypothesis” and “The incitement to Discourse” at the beginning of the second part of his *Will to Power (La volonté de savoir)*, the first volume of the *History of Sexuality* (FOUCAULT, 1978). Leaving aside Huysssen’s interpretation of Sebald with which one certainly may argue, what interests me is Foucault’s own assessment of the proliferation of discourse on sex, because of, rather than, the interdiction on it that he dates to the 17th century. Could something similar be at play in the case of the Portuguese silencing of the atrocities of the dictatorship and of the multiple traumas of the colonial war? Or would that be too neat an explanation? For one, even though there always were literary and other artistic representations that exposed the wounds inflicted by the dictatorship and the colonial wars, these were neither extensive – indeed, rather the opposite – nor had much of a public impact. It may well be that a writer of the caliber and intensity of a Lobo Antunes, who focused on both from the very beginning of his literary career with *Memórias de Elefante [Elephant’s Memory]* and *Os Cus de Judas [The Land at the End of the World]* (LOBO ANTUNES, 1979 and 1979) saw his books sell in relatively large numbers, but that does not mean that he was read much beyond a certain circle and even though he and others who did relentlessly confront the national traumas, such as Lídia Jorge (JORGE, 1988) do enjoy national and international prestige, they never received the level of attention and admiration that José Saramago received. Certainly, the fact that Saramago received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1998 helped. And yet, in spite of his fervent communist beliefs, Saramago never addressed either the colonial wars or the dictatorship in his vast and great oeuvre. As such and without in any way wanting to diminish his qualities or his consistent striving for a better society, I would suggest that Saramago was much less of a nightmare for the ruling elites who could thus rejoice in his international projection as yet another way of demonstrating to the outside world what a good, compliant, and fully integrated, (neo-) liberal democracy Portugal had become.

Unlike the process described by Foucault whereby the imposition of silence surrounding the fabrication of a social taboo, such as sex in modern society gives rise to a proliferation of veiled, but unmistakable, discourses on sex, the silence tacitly agreed upon and served to the people by the various elites in Portugal surrounding the dictatorship and the colonial wars did not result in a proliferation of discourses on both. The unmistakable and undeniable traumatic nature of both, as opposed to the possibility at least of joy in the case of sex, might help explain the different outcomes. Without venturing any further into an area which, without further extensive research, would always remain at a basic speculative level, let me nonetheless suggest

that the few examples of literary, filmic, and other artistic works exposing the wounds of the dictatorship and the colonial war did so not as a result of the generalized silence, and much less as part of a proliferation of discourse, but rather as a form of witnessing and resistance that endures against the grain of official revisionist versions of the past that would always like to bury it as deep as possible so it may never be held against the powerful. And yet it always resurfaces even if only to be buried even deeper by successive elites. As various observers such as Manuel Loff and Raquel Varela amply document, by now even the memory of the Revolution has been fetishized and commodified to the point that what gets celebrated is just a moment, the 25th of April, as if it were singular, unique, and not part of a movement and a process – turning it into an empty husk of what had been a real promise of hope for an entire generation, or even less than that. If one goes back to that image of the four leaders of the apocalypse (of truth in any case) and holds it together with that of a carnation on a gun barrel – of which there are countless variations as befits a spectral commodity – one may well have a dual symptom for the silence and erasure of memory.

Seizing on that possibility, I want now to turn to a consideration of a different dual symptom, one that attempts at piercing, however tentatively, through that silence in an attempt at ransoming the memories it would deny, for future generations. I have in mind two recent films: *Cartas a uma ditadura* [Letters to a Dictator(ship)], de Inês de Medeiros (MEDEIROS, 2006) e *Cartas da Guerra* [War Letters] de Ivo M. Ferreira (FERREIRA, 2016). The very use of the form of letters as the basis for both films would seem to indicate an attempt at conversation – emerging from an individual, private, context to a wider, national at least, if not international, audience level. Moreover, both films make use of letters written a considerable time ago, 1958 and 1971 respectively, what also would seem to indicate a common interest in exploring the past. As the titles of both also make explicit, the latter is concerned with war, and specifically, the colonial war, whereas the former addresses the dictatorship, both indeed reflecting on, and in some way, representing past trauma. As such, both can also be said to engage directly with questions of memory and postmemory. Yet, this is probably as far as the similarities go. It is not just that ten years separate these films, it is much more that both formally and in terms of their basic ideological underpinning, they are quite different. And yet, both represent, in their varied ways, a very contemporary way of breaking through the silences and to allow the memory of those traumatic events speak to the present. In that there is yet one other significant similarity and that is, that even though nostalgia does surface in both films the films themselves are not nostalgic. Even if for nothing else, that ought to single them out for reflection.

The fact that both films rely on actual letters already points out to the very process of mediating memory across generations that is one of the characteristics of postmemory.³ In both cases the letters are personal. Howe-

ver, whereas in *Cartas da Guerra* the letters are all from one man, António Lobo Antunes, when he was stationed in Angola as a medical officer, to his wife in Portugal, the letters in *Cartas a uma ditadura* are written by many different women, all answering another letter, sent to them asking for their collaboration in ensuring the future of the nation, that is in supporting the dictatorship, by a mysterious Movimento Nacional das Mulheres Portuguesas (National Movement of Portuguese Women). As the narrative voice (Inês de Medeiros) informs us right at the beginning, about a hundred of those letters were found in an antiquarian bookshop, having never been read because of an unfounded belief they were love letters. A curious misreading more symptomatic of enduring stereotypes about women in Portugal than anything else, and one that can be contrasted to the letters of Lobo Antunes, who really are lyrical love letters as much as they are also letters about the war. Contingency then, must be seen as a crucial factor behind the presentation of those letters, found and preserved by chance and addressed to an unknown addressee, which nonetheless, the writers of the letters imagine as being, like them, other women. These letters then, are at once personal – even private, in the recollection of specific values, experiences, hardships, and hopes of the various women who wrote them – and already public and political. For even if they were never meant to be published or voiced in a film, the subject matter they all refer, was none other than the present and future of the nation.

In a sense, a reflection on the present and future of the nation also informs *Cartas da Guerra* inasmuch as it aims to confront the past and in special the ghosts of the colonial war, a process without which one cannot imagine any future for the nation beyond that of endlessly recycling long-exhausted pieties and thus reproducing ad infinitum the very structures that were already there from the very beginning of the dictatorship and never actually went away. Or, to say it with Faulkner, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past” (FAULKNER, 2015, p. 85). The letters of Lobo Antunes that it uses – the film’s publicity gladly claims it as an adaptation, which, it is only in a very minor sense as I shall return to – are as much a document as the letters of the women in the other film. Like them, these also represent only one side of a conversation, since we do not have access to the letters his wife wrote to him. And yet, both sets of letters are also radically different and they serve very distinct functions in each of the films. For one, Lobo Antunes’ letters had already been published (LOBO ANTUNES, 2005), to some acclaim, not by the author directly but as edited by his daughters in memory of their deceased mother, who had been the initial addressee. This is a significant added layer of complexity to texts that in themselves are already complex, intensely poetic, and personal, but as revealing as obscuring. Obscuring that is, inasmuch as they always were a form of constructing an authorial self that can never be separated, though it should never be confused, with that of Lobo Antunes the man.⁴

The first crucial formal distinction between the two films then, is actually not that one is a documentary and the other a work of fiction, no matter how closely modelled on reality. Rather, what most significantly separates the two films on a formal level is that whereas one is based on a plurality of women's voices – *Cartas a uma ditadura* opens precisely with the juxtaposition of various women's voices reading the letters – the other relies on one single voice, that of Lobo Antunes, played by Miguel Nunes, as author of the letters, which is reproduced in the film through the voice of Margarida Vila-Nova, the director's wife. The splitting of that voice, so to speak, between the actor playing Lobo Antunes and the actress actually reading from the letters is clever and could represent an attempt on the part of the director to avoid concentrating everything on the figure of Lobo Antunes. This is performed on another level by the positioning of the camera which, though sometimes representing Lobo Antunes' gaze, thus inviting us to see Africa and the war as he might have seen them, most often than not looks at Lobo Antunes himself and his surroundings. Yet, even though the text extracted from the actual letters is actually read by a woman, that does not suffice to abstract from the fact that not only are the letters written very much from the perspective of a man, a man very much in love for certain, but also a man who is exposed to combat action and to all the vagaries of war especially as he steadily grows to question any of the bearings of the government and the ideology behind it. The universe of the film can be said to be concentrationary – the men at one point spending their resting time in abject conditions underground – and always, even when movement is involved, or when the camera reveals the natural expanse of the territory, focused on an enclosed space, the barracks, the make-shift lavatories, the Unimogs used to carry them, so that even in the open we only see them marching close together, expecting to be attacked at any and all times.

By contrast, and even though a great part of *Cartas a uma ditadura* plays inside, in a room or a kitchen, where the director interviews several of the women who wrote the letters in 1958, one never has the feel of being enclosed. In part this is due to the use of archival footage that shows a variety of events, political manifestations of support for Salazar, the dictator on the grounds of the country estate he lived in, scenes from the electoral campaign of Humberto Delgado, as well as various events and ceremonies, including visits to hospitals and other charity work performed by women. Indeed, the moments one feels close to being confined, is when we see a large mass of women all pressing together and entering a park from which they frantically wave white handkerchiefs to salute Salazar or when one or other of the women being interviewed either evades a direct answer about her political thoughts and stand in 1958 or rather brazenly still defends the dictatorship for its supposed moral values. One is tempted to think that this might have to do with the relaxed and polite, almost friendly tone of the conversations Inês Medeiros has with the women she interviews in opposition to the efforts to expose the inhumanity of war and how the soldiers, to

a great extent, were themselves victims of historical circumstances in which they were mere pawns. But this should be rejected, no matter how tempting it may be. For one, neither are the conversations so friendly as they may appear, much less aimless. Inês de Medeiros succeeds in having the women open up and expose, whether frankly or not, their positions, thoughts and feelings.

And yet, that in itself is never quite impartial or neutral. Regardless of how the audience might feel watching the women talking about their views, the film makes clear how for the majority of those interviewed the past was not a haunted and haunting place, but rather one they missed.⁵ The ideologic foundation of their youth, aligned with the dictatorship's mantra of "Deus, Pátria e Família" [God, Country and Family], the "Trilogy of National Education" in the series of seven posters under the heading of "A Lição de Salazar" [Salazar's lesson] of 1938.⁶ Nor should this surprise anyone for, as Ana Paula Ferreira aptly has argued, "the discourse on Woman bec[ame] the privileged *dispositif* of (Fascist) 'Portugueseness'" (FERREIRA, 1996, p. 141). The only shock, if any, comes not from the internalization by bourgeois women – the majority of those interviewed – of clearly misogynistic views that consigned women to the domestic sphere but that it still informs how they see themselves as women, mothers, spouses – woman as the 'fada do lar' [the home's fairy] as one of those interviewed still brings out repeating the then contemporary propaganda.

There is no doubt that *Cartas da Guerra* wants to condemn war and not just war in general, but very specifically a particular war, a colonial war, which not only was an anachronism in itself, but destined to fail from the beginning. It was a war that marked an entire generation and affected all Portuguese – about 1 million men were sent to fight in Africa in the 13 years the war lasted – to say nothing of the African peoples who endured it. The comparison with the Vietnam war, in spite of all the obvious differences, comes readily to mind. And *Apocalypse Now* thus is also a natural reference point. Not that much should be made of that as Ferreira's film is quite distinct from Coppola's even if both have points of convergence. One of those is composed by the scene of nightly entertainment provided by two Portuguese singers, surrounded by an ululating crowd of lustful soldiers, which is very reminiscent of a similar scene in *Apocalypse Now* with two "Playboy bunnies", dressed as "Cowgirl and Indian" in hot pants, descending from a helicopter to perform before a similar crowd. In Coppola's film, the soldiers cannot contend themselves and as some invade the stage and reach for the two women they have to be quickly evacuated by the hovering helicopter, something that does not take place in Ferreira's film, where both the performance, as well as the men's reactions, are more subdued. Where Ferreira's film more closely approximates Coppola's though, is in the decision to present us with realistic – even if highly aestheticized – images purporting to depict the war, with a whole series of acts of direct violence. In that it moves away from what should also be seen as other key filmic references for *Cartas da Guerra*, such as *Um Adeus Português* [A Portuguese

Farewell] by João Botelho (1986) *Non, ou a vã glória de mandar* [Non, or the Vainglory of Command] by Manoel de Oliveira (1990), and specially *A Costa dos Murmúrios* by Margarida Cardoso (2004), titled after the eponymous novel by Lídia Jorge. In those, direct violence is either deflected into a shame that renders the war unsayable, rendered mostly allegorically, or replaced by a generalized malaise and domestic violence that lets us see how colonial violence pervaded every aspect of life and was not confined to the battle zones or the barracks.

Both films received some critical attention and prizes when they were first shown. *Cartas da Guerra*, however, benefited from an international attention that escaped *Cartas a uma ditadura*. Certainly, the official backing the film received, being proposed to the Oscars under “Best Foreign Film category” and submitted as only Portuguese entry to the 2016 *Berlinale* greatly contributed to such attention. The international press invariably compared *Cartas da Guerra* to another film treating the topic of Portuguese colonialism, Miguel Gomes’ *Tabu*, which had won the Silver Bear at the 2012 *Berlinale* and had been widely hailed as a revelation by all critics – with perhaps the single exception of A. O. Scott writing in the *New York Times*.⁷ Part of what so seduced the critics and made them see *Tabu* as a revelation was the fact that the colonialism depicted in the film was both immediately recognizable as part of a European legacy and yet completely alien, so that viewers outside Portugal might look upon it, indulge in its nostalgia, and not feel any trace of guilt. Or as Scott incisively put it: “‘Tabu’ views colonialism as an aesthetic opportunity rather than a political or moral problem” (SCOTT, 2012).

Cartas da Guerra never ceases showing us that the war and colonialism were indeed political and ethical problems. One of its key concerns would seem to represent the quick political awakening of the character of Lobo Antunes guided by his commanding officer, Captain Ernesto Melo Antunes, who would become the leading intellectual figure of the revolution. Nor can one say that it is nostalgic, at least not in the sense that *Tabu* coyly, dangerously, plays with it, in seeming awareness of both its danger and attraction. And yet, if anything brings *Cartas da Guerra* close to *Tabu* (besides the device of filming in black and white) is its relentless aestheticization, through which at the same time that war is condemned, the solidarity between the men thrown into it, is glorified and presented as if imbued with a terrible beauty. This stands in stark contrast to the way in which *Cartas a uma ditadura* presents us the various women. Whereas the men in *Cartas da Guerra*, although all shown as individuals with their different reactions to the war environment, are foremost seen functioning as a group, the women Inês Medeiros interviews are all presented separately in spite of all having at one point in time also acted collectively in the writing of those letters. Also, the documentary strives to present us the women as if they had arranged themselves for a portrait, with their normal, domestic surroundings as background, whereas the men are clearly outside of their normal milieu. Moreover, the portraits of those women, even if arranged as they inevitably

must be, and exhibiting a kind of aesthetic coherence, are neither aesthetized nor made to assume any special kind of beauty, terrible or otherwise, beyond that pertaining to every human being. The same could be said of the archive footage that is interspersed throughout. If there is a moment in which one can think the film elevates the mundane images of domesticity to a different level, then it comes at the very end in which we see one of the women, Belmira Monteiro, a rural, poor woman who was denied, along with so many others, any education beyond the most basic level, together with a young woman, her granddaughter. But even those last images, in which the connection between the young woman and her grandmother is clearly visible as the grandmother proudly affirms her identity and how she strove to give her children the possibilities denied to her, are devoid of any form of theatricality or posing so that their very simplicity further conveys a sense of dignity, strength, and endurance.

Showing us Belmira Monteiro and her granddaughter together, one the very image of resistance, the other not just its fruit, much more its justification and promise, Inês Medeiros manages to combine past, present and future. In doing that the film effectively replies to the other women who by virtue of privilege, social class, or ideological conviction, remained tied to the past, unable to conceive of any future that would not but be an inferior, even deplorable, version of it. As Fredric Jameson once noted, when conceiving of History as a form of emancipation but eschewing any notion of metaphysical transcendence altogether, “from time to time (...) we are reminded that Utopia exists and that other systems, other spaces, are still possible” (JAMESON, 2009, p. 612). That is more than what can be said about *Cartas da Guerra*, which, in spite of its emphasis on the possibilities of love to ground a better world, cannot, possibly even in terms of a formal coherence, present us that future which, in the film just as in the letters becomes embodied in the figure of the daughter Lobo Antunes anxiously waits for and whom, though already born towards the end of the film, is still to the protagonist stuck in an army camp in Angola, and to us, a radical figure of absence.

From this one should be able to start drawing some conclusions as to how both films relate to the very notion of memory and postmemory. Both are works of postmemory for the reasons already enumerated. But that does not mean that they function in similar ways. In *Cartas da guerra* we can see a desire to understand the parent’s generation. Reaching for Lobo Antunes’ letters, with all of their intensity and virtuosity, is like using a concentrated, powerfully intoxicating, extract to serve as antidote to the generalized silence surrounding the colonial war. It is a serious attempt at effecting a memory transfer across generations and I can imagine that for many who were never exposed to it or its memories directly, the film might come to assume a key function as their one way to access a past that in so many ways still haunts the nation. Yet, in spite of the attempts to personalize the narrative by focusing on the figure of Lobo Antunes and by occasionally

showing us some action or other of the character supposed to represent his wife in Portugal – those dramatizations are shadowy and come across stilted and rather unnatural, as opposed to the stark realist aura attached to the depictions of the soldiers. All in all, perfectly acceptable in terms of creating a nightmarish atmosphere but the line between wanting to relay traumatic experiences and giving in to spectacle can be very thin. When Lobo Antunes' daughters assumed the editorship of the love letters sent by their father to their mother they did several things at once as they not only honoured the memory of her deceased mother and the love that had united her and their father, but also by publishing them moved them firmly from the private and intimate sphere into the public one. Thus, when Ferreira, a friend of one of Lobo Antunes' daughters, decides to make a film about the colonial war using some of those letters as both source and counterpart to the images – in itself an ambivalent but successful strategy – and when he has his wife read from the letters in the film – and recounts in interview how the idea for the film came to him upon arriving home one day and hearing his wife read aloud from the letters to their expected child⁸ – we can see a process of identification, even if not transfer, that feels very personal. Watching the film though, and even with access to the information on its making, neither the personal identification nor an imaginable transference takes place. The war memories reach us but rather impersonally in spite of the forceful nature of the letters and the expressive dramatization. The realist representation, the attention to historically correct details, the use of 'authentic' army equipment, the focus on a strictly male universe in which women are either absent for a great part, when not fetishized, reified, or abused, all combine to make *Cartas da Guerra* a work not only of postmemory but also of postnostalgia.

Cartas a uma ditadura is not so much keen on remembering the dictatorship as it is in reflecting on how it still has a firm grip on many Portuguese. The use of the actual letters found in the antiquarian shop and presented in a chest to the women interviewed marks them as symbols of the very process of transmitting memory. Yet, the letters in a sense function more like a pretext than an actual text, the memories they contain actually paling in significance when compared with the memories the women tell the film director in answer to her questions. The transmission of memory across generations that takes place is certainly important, but it is a deflected transmission without any proper addressee, in a way not dissimilar to the original letters. The film's audience receives those memories but they can only be made of personal significance once abstracted from their very personal context. What might seem a paradox is not one in reality but merely an effect of the double mediation brought about by having those women remember their personal history in public for all effects, in spite of the simulation of intimacy provided by the setting. Part of that, the one crucial *mise-en-scène* underlying the whole film, is made possible by the absence of their interlocutor, their immediate audience, the director whom we hear but never see. Indeed, this carefully arranged structural element of the film is only broken twice. The first time, inadvertently, it seems, when the figure

of a woman in what might be the uniform of a domestic employee is fleetingly glimpsed in a mirror as she moves along. That figure, I would suggest, however contingent, becomes excessive as a figuration itself of absence. The second time is when we see Belmira Monteiros's granddaughter smiling as she hears her grandmother recall all she had to undergo in order to insure her children would not be treated as if they were sub-human, by the rich people for whom she went to work so they did not have to. And in those final moments of the film we can indeed see the process of postmemory at work as the granddaughter listens to her grandmother. No magic, no allegory, not even a trace of sentimentality, just the proud affirmation of unbroken dignity being passed along in a profound ransoming of memory.

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NOTAS

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2 The photo I am referring to can be easily accessed online, for instance here: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bush,_Barroso,_Blair,_Aznar_at_Azores.jpg. The full text of the press conference held after the summit can be accessed here: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/mar/17/iraq.politics2>.

3 The concept of postmemory is widely credited to the work of Marianne Hirsch (see in special her book *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*, 2012). Even though it has also been initially contested, among others by Beatriz Sarlo in *Tiempo pasado*, 2005) it is now generally used to refer specifically to mediated representations of the past across generations.

4 For an exploration of the question of authorship in Lobo Antunes’ letters see “Until the End of the World” (MEDEIROS, 2008).

5 Alison Ribeiro de Menezes has provided an extensive analysis of *Cartas a uma ditadura*, discussing its treatment of memory and comparing it to another documentary focused on the violence exerted by the PIDE (political secret police), Susana de Sousa Dias’ *48* (DE MENESES, 2020). There is much to agree in the views expounded there, and the comparison can be understood as imminently logical. At the same time, I think there are radical differences in the two projects and their form in spite of both being documentaries and directed by women. Those differences, in a way, might have led to a view of *Cartas a uma*

ditadura as less accomplished, or at least less clear, in condemning the dictatorship and its violence. But that, I would suggest, misreads the project of *Cartas a uma ditadura*, inasmuch as its strength lies precisely in the way in which it simulates a given neutrality in its approach to a loaded past. Whereas de Meneses would see the film as reading the archive along the grain, I tend more to see it as exposing the ideological cracks of that archive that the multiple silences keep from becoming open craters. Indeed, I would rather think that what Mariana Souto has rightly observed about *48*, saying that “the director produces a discourse that resists from the inside, turning government material into her own weapons” (SOUTO, 2015, p. 46) could also be applied to *Cartas a uma ditadura*.

6 The series of posters can be accessed here as part of “Visualizing the New State (1933-1974), a project from the Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian and Massachusetts Institute of Technology: <http://visualizingportugal.com/ed-vn3-8-lessons-salazar/2013/4/2/a-lio-de-salazar>.

7 Scott’s conclusion to his review indicates the ambivalence that permeates Gomes’ film and that, even as it might lend it seductiveness, renders it highly problematic:

The themes of innocence and sin percolate in Mr. Gomes’s century-straddling, stylistically heterogeneous narrative, but he is interestingly sly about how they are distributed between past and present. If the film enacts a fall, it is from a relatively guiltless present into a more corrupt past that is also a realm of greater beauty and more intense feeling.

This is a dubious notion, and “*Tabu*” makes it convincing only within the narrow compass of its own artifice. It is, of course, art rather than history – an elegant composition of dreams, memories and suggestive images – but its artfulness seems like an alibi, an excuse for keeping the ugliness of history out of the picture (SCOTT, 2012).

Whereas this is not the place to discuss *Tabu*, readers may be interested in divergent critical opinions as expressed for instance by Lucia Nagib in “Colonialism as Fantastic Realism in *Tabu*” (2018) and Paulo de Medeiros in “Post-imperial Nostalgia and Miguel Gomes’ *Tabu*” (2016).

8 See the article written by Vasco Câmara for *Ípsilon*, the cultural supplement of *Público* (2016) in anticipation of the film’s *première* in Portugal.