



**MEMOIRS** - FILHOS DE IMPÉRIO E PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS | **MEMOIRS** - CHILDREN OF EMPIRES AND EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES  
**MAPS** - PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS: UMA CARTOGRAFIA PÓS-COLONIAL | **MAPS** - EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES: A POSTCOLONIAL CARTOGRAPHY

Saturday, 29 May 2021

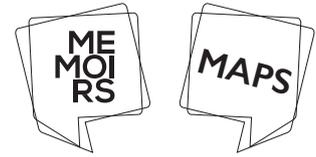


*Posto avançado do progresso* | 2014 | Hugo Vieira da Silva (courtesy of the director)

## GHOSTS OF THE EMPIRE

António Pinto Ribeiro | Margarida Calafate Ribeiro

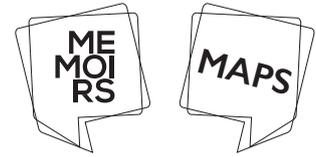
Empires are always fictions for those who manage them from the metropolises, for those who dream of them from failed lives, and for those who are on the other side, who breathe daily oppression and imagine a distant but omnipresent and powerful metropolis. These are the images that give the apparent reality to this fiction. Images constructed by literature, cinema, photography, museums, exhibitions, art and popular stories contribute to the creation of imperial fantasies that today approach us in the form of ghosts. In the film by Ariel de Bigault it all starts with the name - Ghosts of the Empire. This title constructs a context that



## GHOSTS OF THE EMPIRE

immerses us in a national memory archive of images presented as a family photo album, which the heirs will comment in real life and fictionally. The heirs - Fernando Matos Silva, João Botelho, Margarida Cardoso, Hugo Vieira da Silva, Ivo M. Ferreira, Manuel Faria de Almeida, Joaquim Lopes Barbosa - and their films speak to this imperial phantasmagoria, its outcomes, its misunderstandings, and its shadows. This archive is simultaneously distant and familiar to them, like family albums in which we have barely identified our great-grandparents, but in whom, paradoxically, we recognize a look that is also ours.

In one of the first scenes of the film “Fantasmas do Império”, the actor Ângelo Torres, addressing José Manuel Costa, the director of the Portuguese Cinematheque, evokes the private theory of cinema by the Chilean director Patricio Guzman: “Un país sin cine documental es como un familia sin álbum de fotografías. Una memoria vacía”. José Manuel Costa replies that if this is the case, the images in this film are the common heritage of the Portuguese and the Africans who appear in them, and the common heritage of those who filmed them and those who were filmed. The two statements are essential to understand the historical opportunity of this film, and fundamental to the debate about these images in the archive and about the fiction that they produced and continue to produce. For that, the mastery of the editing by the director Ariel de Bigault was perfect. In the face of the images of the colonizer cinema, produced by the directors of the colonialist regime, the director includes excerpts from films produced by directors who question the colonial regime, colonialist nostalgia, or just what remained phantasmagorical in the empire’s declination. This results in a film that is an epic counter-epic. The images of the propaganda films (first dating back to 1923), technically very well made, did not aim only to seduce viewers and impose the narrative of a nation that expanded overseas. These images were powerful instruments of representation of the other, staged in a way that humiliated, subordinated and reduced bodies to pure workforce, and black human beings to infantilized people. This depersonalization, infantilization, and humiliation is present in scenes in which these bodies are working as only arms or those in which Africans are forced to imitate dances of Portuguese folklore. The human zoos in which Africans and Timorese were exhibited living in a completely constructed and fictional landscape, like an *avant la lettre* theme park. They demonstrate the unlimited violence of the Empire and the dimension of the colonist’s authoritarian performative word - its law, its language, its strength, but also its *spell*, the power of its unique image without counter-argument.

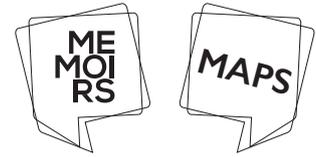


## GHOSTS OF THE EMPIRE

Cinema was one of the first arts that began the process of questioning the visually intense and discursively excessive colonial narrative of these films during the dictatorial regime and more intensely in the democratic regime. However, if there is a film in which the editing is definitely a political act, as J.L. Godard stated, “Ghosts of the Empire” is exemplary. In a skilful work contrasting selected archival imagery from colonialist films with modern films deconstructing colonialism, Ariel de Bigault’s montage constantly plays with counterpoint and counter-timing, reinforced by the testimonies of the invited Portuguese directors and of the African actors, Ângelo Torres and Orlando Sérgio. From elsewhere, they question the images and the status of these films, and a more discreet web supports this visual narrative. It is the sequence of images assembled cinematographically according to the logic of the “good neighbour” in the expression of Aby Warburg.

I imagine that some will say that these Portuguese films did not face the counter arguments of the African cinema of the former Portuguese colonies, but, in fact, the question does not make sense because neither African cinema was made to confront these films, nor does this film need to legitimize itself as an anti-colonial and post-colonial cinema through other films. Yet there is the presence of what was happening on the other side, namely through images of the territories of Guinea-Bissau controlled by Guineans in the liberation struggle in the film “Acto dos feitos da Guiné” by Fernando Matos Silva. There is an important debate within the film, and the vast set of questions asked need answers. Among them, there is one unavoidable question posed by Ângelo Torres, where he asks what is the answer that African filmmakers can give, at the present time, to these colonial fantasies created by the Empire? And what will the following generations of Portuguese directors bring to the film with these images?

It is through the perspective of post-colonial directors that we realise that what our ancestors saw in the films of the colonial regime, is not what we see today, even though obviously these images have not changed. However, both reception subjects and reception contexts have changed, thus changing the images and the dialogue that we can establish with them. The seduction of imperial greatness presented as a triumphal march and the pillars on which this greatness was based is the topic that everyone questions in their films. The young and apparently happy black bodies waiting for civilization are violated bodies; endless landscapes and horizons are occupied territories; modern and developed cities hide the color of those who



## **GHOSTS OF THE EMPIRE**

built them from below; the civilization brought by the colonizers that the films document in an enchanting harmony erases the resistances and the struggles against this colonial action. Today, these films are silent regarding these aspects, but also very vocal due to the silences they build. Fantasies or ghosts? The fractures are there and one cannot forge a common past with such different memories. This extensive conversation brilliantly orchestrated by Ariel de Bigault demonstrates that having a common past does not immediately mean sharing it.

Under a simple categorization, *Ghosts of the Empire* is a post-colonial film. It displays in the present what was a certain past, and in realizing that the present is full of that past, it has all the strength of a contemporary anti-colonial struggle film. A world in which the vestiges of the past that permeate our present in the form of fractures are the object of symbolic work that begins to produce new hybrid and cosmopolitan forms of culture that are characteristic of a new post-colonial, transnational and post-migratory time.

António Pinto Ribeiro and Margarida Calafate Ribeiro

Translated by Margarida Bonifácio

## GHOSTS OF THE EMPIRE

**António Pinto Ribeiro** is a researcher at the Centre for Social Studies at the University of Coimbra, and part of the project *Memoirs: Children of Empire and European Post-memories* (ERC Consolidator Grant, nº 648624). He is a curator, and his latest works include: *África, os quatro rios, a representação de África através da literatura de viagens europeia e norte-americana* [Africa, the four rivers, the representation of Africa through European and North American travel literature], Edições Afrontamento, 2017 and *Peut-on Décolonizer les musées?* [Can we Decolonize museums?], Gulbenkian Foundation, Paris, 2019.

**Margarida Calafate Ribeiro** is senior researcher at the Centre for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra and PI of the project *Memoirs - Children of Empire and European Postmemories* (ERC Consolidator Grant, nº 648624) and *Maps: European Postmemories: a postcolonial cartography* (FCT - PTDC/LLT-OUT/7036/2020). She is responsible for the Eduardo Lourenço Chair, Camões / University of Bologna (with Roberto Vecchi).

ISSN 2184-2566

*MEMOIRS* is funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (no. 648624); *MAPS - European Post-memories: a post-colonial cartography* is funded by the Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia (FCT - PTDC/LLT-OUT/7036/2020). Both projects are hosted at the Centre for Social Studies (CES), University of Coimbra.



Cofinanciado por:

