

The Past Tense of Our Selves: *Um adeus português* in 1980s Portugal

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Abstract: *The central topic of João Botelho’s Um adeus português (1986), is memory in 1980s Portuguese society. The film alternates scenes from 1973, during the colonial war in Africa, with scenes set in 1985, in rural and urban areas of Portugal. In the present essay, I argue that the film enacts the need for a conversation among the Portuguese by opting for a structure that puts its own elements in dialogue. I analyze the film’s stylistic features while also contextualizing it within 1980s Portugal. This study is anchored in five themes: war, race, class, labor, and religion.*

Keywords: Portuguese cinema; João Botelho; social history; memory; colonial wars

The central topic of João Botelho’s *Um adeus português* (1986) is memory in Portuguese society—more precisely, the need for memory and its sparse presence in 1980s Portugal. It is not surprising that the initial title of the film was *Se a memória existe*, which suggests a kind of investigation based on a hypothesis. As Botelho has confessed, the film is about the present, not the past (“Si la mémoire existe” 21). *Um adeus português* alternates scenes from 1973, during the colonial war in Africa, with scenes set in 1985, in rural and urban areas of Portugal. As Paulo Cunha argues, it is “um filme que tenta articular o presente com o passado” (201). The plot is straightforward: a soldier named Augusto dies in the war, and his family gathers twelve years after his death. In this sense, it is a “um drama familiar directamente relacionado com a dor física e psicológica provocada pela guerra” (Cunha 201).

The film gives form to the idea that by the mid-1980s, the colonial wars

had become history and were therefore something upon which people could reflect. This reflection includes the acknowledgement of how that history “makes people uncomfortable” and causes them “[to] look at the floor ashamed,” as Augusto’s brother, Alexandre, confesses.¹ There is at once a need to discuss this past and an equally ardent desire to distance oneself from it. The motion picture develops different modes of representing silence, “um silêncio que repercute o da própria sociedade portuguesa (sobretudo no caso de Botelho, devido à sua temporalidade) sobre a questão colonial” (Schefer 162). Any adequately contextualized account of the representation of the colonial war and decolonization in Portuguese cinema must recognize the crucial importance of this silence (Maurício). Influenced by the materialist filmmakers Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, Botelho uses the constant back and forth between a distant past (in dense black and white) and an opaque present (in postcard-like color) to reveal the very real absence that obtains between them (Botelho, “Se isto não é o cinema”).

The April Revolution is absent in *Um adeus português*; however, this absence operates less as a lack and more as an unstated point of tension. The film’s tension comes particularly from a pervasive immobility, even when the characters and objects seem to be moving. Maria Noguera comments on a scene in which the image of the Portuguese flag appears on the television screen, arguing that it serves “to externalize the uncertainty of a country that, like its flag, has become paralyzed” (220). Noguera is likewise correct to point out that the “immobility of the characters, who often remain sitting and still within the cinematic frame, as well as the lack of a horizon of hope in the context of family and relationships, in which silence and secrecy reign” function primarily to invalidate Portugal’s principal national myths (219-20).

Cunha sees Botelho’s film as “um dos principais exemplos cinematográficos da nova percepção política e social do pós-25 de Abril” (201). He goes on to argue that:

A obra de Botelho pretende a divulgação de uma contra-memória em relação aos sentimentos de nacionalismo e imperialismo, em clara

¹ My citations of English dialogue from the film come directly from the subtitles in the same language; these were translated by Sheilah Cardoso and Ana de Freitas and included in the DVD version of the film.

oposição à memória histórica cultivada durante a vigência do Estado Novo. . . . *Um adeus português* é o melhor exemplo da tentativa de construção de uma nova memória, fruto do eminente julgamento histórico e ideológico que contagiou a opinião pública portuguesa após a Revolução de Abril e o processo de descolonização subsequente. (201-02)

Jorge Leitão Ramos concludes that a peculiar perspective as well as a singular filmmaker are born with *Um adeus português*: “Um olhar austero e singular toma forma específica no interior do cinema português” (56).

I agree with Cunha, Nogueira, and Ramos; however, I would add also that Botelho’s film serves more precisely as a meditative depiction of the difficulty and suffering involved in coming to grips with the recent history of the Portuguese nation and empire. The movie was released in the year that Portugal entered the European Economic Community (EEC). This event was instrumental in building a narrative of a country transitioning from an Atlantic past to a European future (Pinto and Teixeira). It also helped the Portuguese to evade, once again, the need to break the awkward silence about their history and their selves, as Portugal was then integrated into a capitalist structure that would be developed even further within the European Union (EU). This collective avoidance has personal and interpersonal dimensions. Cunha argues that Botelho’s films question the present through the presence of the past: “É um presente onde os pais, um irmão e a viúva não conseguem olhar para o futuro, não conseguem dar passos decisivos . . . , sempre agarrados aos fantasmas de ontem” (201). I argue that the film enacts the need for a conversation among the Portuguese by opting for a structure that puts elements of scenes in dialogue. My goal is to analyze the film in terms of its stylistic features while also contextualizing it within 1980s Portugal. I focus on five themes developed in *Um adeus português*: war, race, class, labor, and religion.

Colonial War and Ghostliness

“‘Slowly. We’ve got plenty of time,’ the second lieutenant said.” These are the first words that one hears in *Um adeus português*. The soldiers left families behind, waving handkerchiefs “for ages on the dock.” The unidentified narrator

says of those who watched them leave: “They think of us in their sadness.” The narrator then conveys information about the shared experience of the soldiers using the first-person plural: “We’ll never be able to be apart again. Suddenly we’re friends, brothers. We tell each other so many secrets. We’re all in the same boat and we’ll be tied to this land forever.” Not only the soldiers, who lived this unexpected brotherhood, but those who remember them are tied to this land. “How long did the first hour last?” the narrator repeats. Where does this voice come from? We know that it belongs to one of the soldiers. Only later, in the other segments on the war, can we match this voice to a character, when the voiceover narration stops and we finally hear the characters speak. As Noguera points out, the soldiers remain unnamed (220); however, one can later confirm that the narrator’s voice, which tells us about the immeasurable slowness of the passing of time, is that of Augusto. His, therefore, is the speaking of the dead and buried that are still with us, haunting our present history as if time stood still.

Botelho has disclosed that it took him almost a year to convince the Portuguese army to participate in the film, largely due to their reluctance to deal with the recent past, even though they had nothing against the narrative elements of the project (“Si la mémoire existe” 20). As Botelho tells it, the Portuguese army was confronted with a portrait of itself in the colonial war, a fact that challenged them to look at the army at the time of the production, particularly taking into account the fundamental role of the military in the Carnation Revolution. Augusto finishes the first section of his narration with a reflection on how soldiers viewed themselves through the eyes of their mothers: “A soldier takes the air-letter he started yesterday: ‘Dear mother... Dear mother, you can be proud. I’m a soldier. Don’t worry—I’m a soldier. Keep loving me. I’m a soldier.’” These intimate letters from men drafted to defend a crumbling empire add to the landscape of voices that Botelho introduces with Augusto’s first words.

The film’s first image of the past is that of a soldier’s eyes opening. Then we see one of his ears. The shots emphasize attention—in particular, looking and hearing attentively. The opening of eyes also evokes the wish for a different state of affairs—as if the eyes that were closed would open to another, more desirable situation or at least a new consciousness about the circumstances in which the soldier finds himself. Augusto’s voice tells us that

the war has been going on for 12 years and that, day by day, they travel through the same landscape, following the same routine: “In 22 months of service a soldier goes on 160 patrols in the bush, 3000 hours of duty. The same scenery all day.” “His two eyes are useless” is how this voice describes the men’s sensorial numbness. The eyes are useless because they see too much, since “there are so many noises and so much silence.” They suffer under a merciless sun, “like Portugal in midsummer,” but they have to endure it. They are soldiers.

A dead man like Augusto makes a peculiar narrator, one that anticipates events in that he has already lived them. “The 2nd Lieutenant grips his arm, smiling,” he tells us. “The poor soldier perks up again, hitches up his pack to make it lighter, takes a firm grip on his gun and is a new man again.” What is unusual about this voice is that it is retrospective, it is a voice that speaks about the past as if it were revealing the future, indeed as if there were no future. When Augusto is hit, a soldier holds his head with his right hand and shakes him with his left hand while shouting: “Open your eyes, sergeant, open your eyes!” It is too late; he has passed away. From the decisions, reactions, talks, and meditations of the combatants, the film conveys a sense of fatigue that relates to a dearth of purpose. Contrary to their enemy, who is fighting for national emancipation, they feel that they are not fighting for their people or their country. The country where the colonial war scenes take place is not identified, but the depiction of the conflict evokes Angola, if we consider the director’s comments: “A maior parte dos que morreram, morreram de acidente, de loucura ou de isolamento. Não por causa dos confrontos armados. Na Guiné, sim. Mas, em Angola havia cinco mil combatentes num país que é catorze vezes maior que Portugal. Nunca se encontravam. Era uma espécie de guerra-fantasma” (Grilo 97). The film finds ways of expressing this situation by subtracting all “epic nuance” as “soldiers appear talking, smoking, eating, singing and even sleeping, never in combat operations, much less in the heat of battle” (Noguera 220-21). The densely textured black and white shots, crowded with vegetation, gives visual form to the soldiers’ feelings of misplacement and confusion. These scenes were shot in the Tapada Nacional de Mafra, an eight square-kilometer public park located 40 kilometers north of Lisbon. Noguera notes that “the African territory where the war takes place is presented as a dark and hazy space, where the immensity of the night is imposed, which

deliberately prevents any indication of economic, social or cultural prosperity in this gloomy overseas scenario” (222). The film reproduces the war either in the park or in a studio, and Botelho does not mask or hide this fact. He instead uses the restricted landscape of the park or the fabricated backgrounds of the studio set to give these scenes a ghostly, almost unnatural feel.

Class Conflict and Closeness

The first scenes set in the present take place in a rural area in northern Portugal, a region that was not transformed by the revolution as the south had been. Most of the Southern poor consisted of rural wage earners subjected to the exploitative working conditions imposed by large landowners. The agrarian reforms that arose from the April Revolution allowed for a more productive use of the land as well as for the substantial improvement of the lives of agriculture workers through the development of collective farming in 1975. In contrast, the rural north was mainly composed of small landowners, peasants and shepherds. The scenes that occur in this region demonstrate that very little changed with the revolution. Botelho in fact films the dinner scene with Augusto’s parents as a kind of x-ray image of the structure of social classes in northern Portugal. The camera captures Piedade and Raul dining from a frontal angle. One sees the maid in the kitchen, beyond an interior frame. The angle reduces the depth of the shot so that they seem closer than they really are. The next shot adopts an oblique angle, and the table at which the couple is seated gains depth and gives additional information regarding the measuring of the space, but the maid is excluded from the frame. She depends on this family, not only for a wage but also for a place to live, but she is at the same time disconnected from it. There is an evident conflict between classes, which takes the form of dependence and dominance, but that is concealed by daily closeness.

Augusto’s parents later decide to go to Lisbon, despite his mother’s frail health. Piedade’s departure is infused with Augusto’s presence. When she leaves her room with the maid, the camera frames the bed and the small furniture, including a crucifix over the bed, and then slowly approaches his framed picture by the bed. Next, Raul stops by the side of the housekeeper, who is feeding the chicken, and tells her that he is going to speak to her husband, the caretaker. An extreme long shot shows the maid climbing the set of steps

outside the house and returning to the house with groceries, while Raul approaches and talks to the housekeeper at the base of the stairs. It is in the context of this snapshot of the division of labor in a single moving image that Raul comes to the caretaker António and asks: “Will you take care of this?” “Don’t worry about it, Mr. Lima,” António replies. The shot is not as wide as the previous one, but we glimpse the caretaker’s boy running and playing in the background. This is yet another example of the spatial inscription of everyday relations between families and people of different classes. Another instance materializes right after they return from the capital. Raul is taking a walk in his property alone and we see a female farmworker plowing in the background.

In Lisbon, Alexandre asks his father if António still works for him. Raul responds that he does and further explains that “[h]is children are helping him out nowadays.” The economic and social structure is maintained from one generation to the next. Be that as it may, this exchange between son and father about a father and his children is also a moment that attests to some changes. It develops the difference between Lisbon and what Raul calls “the country” that the film makes visible. “When I was a boy I wanted to come to Lisbon too,” says the father with regret. In the end, Augusto’s parents say goodbye to their remaining children, Laura and Alexandre, knowing that they are seeing them for the last time. They go back to the countryside to die. Alexandre and Laura walk away separately after they part with their mother and father. Alexandre initially tells Rosa that his brother died in an accident; only later does he confess that he could not bring himself to say that he died in the war in Africa. Laura’s reaction is less open. She strolls with her boyfriend, refusing his proposal to go out that night and telling him that “[i]t was difficult for everybody, but we had to do it.” There is a smooth transition between the passing trees of the sidewalk and those next to the railway, connecting their stroll to Raul and Piedade’s train journey and linking her dullness with theirs. Rurality, a key idea for the Salazarist construction of national identity and its social as well as national stratification, finds itself here associated with a destructive fatalism. As Luís Miguel Oliveira de Barros Cardoso puts it: “A ruralidade que no passado assegurava uma identidade, é agora substituída por temáticas de dúvida e desilusão” (238). After Raul and Piedade’s return, António asks Raul if Lisbon is the same and the question is left hanging without an answer. As Noguera observes, the fact that “Lisbon is represented as a

territory more rural than urban, with no trace of the iconography . . . linked to heroic feats of navigation, such as the Torre de Belém, . . . is employed here to dissipate the entire heritage of the country's colonial tradition (220). Still, the past is made present through some pieces of architecture. When the parents walk through Lisbon, they stop by Francisco Keil do Amaral's imperial columns atop the Parque Eduardo VII Park. The scale is massive and turns them into ant-like creatures. By accentuating these aspects—the enduring rural reality in northern Portugal, the monumental urban areas of Lisbon as the previous center of the Portuguese Empire, the persistence of ideas and relations from the Estado Novo—the film shows that little has changed either for Augusto's mother and father or for those who work for them.

Labor Exploitation and Passivity

Um adeus português was shot in 1985, but it was released in April 1986. Between one year and the other, Portugal joined the European Coal and Steel Community and then the EEC, along with Spain. The first structure of trade was created in 1952 and involved the waiving of sovereignty to an executive branch with no officials elected by the citizens of the member-states. It was later incorporated into the EU. As António Costa Pinto and Nuno Severiano Teixeira make clear, the European integration was “an important factor in the break from a dictatorial, isolationist and colonialist past, while simultaneously assuming an anti-Communist and anti-revolutionary dimension” (130). In stating this, Costa Pinto and Severiano Teixeira clarify that this integration, capitalist in nature, not only ran counter to the communists and their allies, but also to the revolution and its progressive character. As they recall, the motto of the Socialist Party (PS), then led by Mário Soares, for the victorious 1976 legislative election campaign was already “A Europa Connosco.” The European Community accession was later incorporated into the party program as a foreign policy priority. Almost a decade had passed when in 1985 the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and Aníbal Cavaco Silva won the legislative elections and followed the same course as the PS and Soares. They welcomed the implementation of the Economic and Monetary Union after 1990 and the signing of the Treaty of Lisbon, which replaced the democratically rejected Constitutional Treaty, thus deepening the neoliberal policies in effect.

The historical realities of 1985 are indirectly present in Botelho's film. As the old couple arrives in Lisbon by train, we catch a glimpse of one of the biggest enterprises created in March 1976 during the revolutionary process. CIMPOR-Cimentos de Portugal was a strategic company in the development of Portuguese infrastructure, and it became the ninth largest cement company in the world. Forecasting the future or not through the signs of the present, the film calls attention to this major industrial company that began to be privatized in 1994, during Cavaco Silva's third term. This fleeting image of an industrialized area on the outskirts of Lisbon is followed by an insightful portrait of urban labor. Alexandre writes sexually explicit stories in a room that resembles a prison. There are no windows and his activity is surrounded by darkness, illuminated solely by a small lamp. His working hours are deregulated, his laboring conditions are precarious, and he has no job security. "Are you having me on?" complains his editor, commenting on the fact that Alexandre's work is late, and adding in a menacing tone: "You either finish this by Saturday or I forget to pay you." This working situation has consequences for Alexandre's personal life. He often misses appointments with his brother's widow Laura and now also with his visiting parents. Afterwards, Alexandre is surprised by his parents at home and they find out that he no longer works in a newspaper. Later, Raul asks his son: "Are you happy in your work?" Alexandre's reply is unemotional and passive: "It's good in the circumstances." This conversation is paralleled with that between Laura and Piedade, who is lying in bed, weak. She tells Laura that she was not very lucky in life, that she deserved better, but "that's the way it goes." It is at this point that Laura confesses that she was pregnant when Augusto died in the war, suggesting that she miscarried the child and concluding that "life destroys a lot of beliefs." This curious fatalism presents itself as a direct response to problems and challenges that are at once social and personal.

The first image of the present in *Um adeus português* is somehow joyful. It shows a landscape full of large green treetops in the foreground and a rainbow in the background. In the segments set in 1985, the colors are enhanced and the clear graphic elements make the shots intentionally picturesque and sometimes distinctly artificial; the first time we see Laura and her boyfriend, they are in a coffee shop, superimposed on an image of an idyllic beach with palm trees as if they are part of a billboard. Everyday life intersects and mixes with advertising

images that promise a false paradise. Botelho has a significant body of work as a graphic artist, despite the fact that he developed this activity mainly in order to finance his filmmaking. The influence of this work is also noticeable in his first feature film, *Conversa acabada* (1981), about the friendship between Fernando Pessoa and Mário de Sá-Carneiro. In an interview for *Cahiers du cinéma*, Botelho explains that he has “filmed Lisbon as if it were postcards; but postcards in reverse” (22). The placidness of Portuguese reality is intensified as something counterfeit. These visual expressions are intertwined with personal relations chained to a traumatic past that hinders the possibility of a different present, but conceal this difficulty. Laura is still Augusto’s widow twelve years after his death. She never remarried, and she calls her late husband’s parents “mother” and “father.” While she is dining with them, Alexandre’s absence is signaled by an empty chair, and they talk about a fruit bowl that Raul and Piedade brought her from home. This is a fragmented family, an instance of the bits of families the film displays. Her in-laws remind her how she admired that object the first time she visited them, and she remembers it well. A key to this scene is Leonor Areal’s argument that the film “põe em evidência um trauma incapaz de se exprimir por palavras, personagens que guardam em si o indizível terror que as habita e que as torna ásperas e inacessíveis” (347). Margarida Calafate Ribeiro, Roberto Vecchi, and António Sousa Ribeiro add that Botelho’s film is exemplary in the way it represents how “the traumatic experiences of the war seem to have been encapsulated in family ‘vaults’” (19). Tense family relations become as tangled and passively unresolved as exploitative labor practices.

Race Relations and Uncertainty

The film’s first scene set in Lisbon takes place at the Ribeira Market, a place of encounters and coexistence between white and black communities, people who have lost their money, and the homeless. A girl pecks a man on the cheek at the end of this scene. We do not see his face, since he is seen only from behind. The remoteness and flatness of this relationship reinforces the idea that unconfessed and undiscussed social fissures are interconnected and affect personal relationships. The urban environment of Lisbon is multiracial and multicultural, but this plurality does not seem to be an integral part of the social

fabric, itself shattered. Later, we see a black man violently arguing with a white woman in an underground railway station. The immediate context of this violence is a conversation between Alexandre and Rosa about their parents in which he chastises her for still living with her mother and father. Rosa decides not to accompany Alexandre to dine with his parents and gives an ambiguous answer about accompanying him the next day. They then both look at the white woman seated next to the same black man who had berated her. Like the fight between Alexandre and Rosa, the multiracial couple's conflict is socially situated; it differs, however, in that it is handled in the open, while the former's conflict is much more passive-aggressive. The scene connects two couples in conflict, suggesting unserved links between the colonialist ideology and social conservatism of the *Estado Novo* and post-revolutionary Portugal.

The portrait of race relations in Botelho's film is mainly developed in the African segment. Carolin Overhoff Ferreira comments that the "suggestion of brotherhood across racial borders overlooks not only the fact that colonialism forced the Africans to take Portugal's side, but ignores the reason for the war: the anti-colonialist struggle" (70). She focuses on the last scene set in Africa. It is not a war scene and it may be an endorsement of colonialism for its "civilizational dimension," a paternalism questioned by Amílcar Cabral that Ferreira does well to recover and bring into the discussion of the film (70). Its tone is crepuscular, almost melancholic. A Portuguese soldier teaches young African boys about Portugal: "Of the rivers which rise in Portugal, the most important are: the Mondego which passes through Coimbra. . . ." It is true that Botelho is mainly interested in the "post-colonial domestic problems, the silencing of the war and the silent suffering of the people it affected" in Portugal, but that does not mean that he "fails to include this anti-colonialist critique" (Ferreira 71). Such a criticism disregards some elements of this scene and of the entire film. The lesson being taught to the African boys is about a river and a landscape that is in another place, far from them, in Portugal. It is not their native land. Portugal is a remote place, far away from their lives. It is this lack of connection between the soldier's discourse and the boys' reality that is expressive. We can deduce that this African colony of the Portuguese empire is Angola, but the film is not explicit about this aspect, a fact that makes this representation somewhat synecdochal. It is as if Africa stood in for Portuguese Africa, with no real existence besides being a colony of an empire, with no

rivers of its own. The studio backgrounds are assumedly fake and the soldiers seem incongruous elements when compared to the local inhabitants. The closing moments gesture towards retreating and mixing. The lieutenant, who has been seated for hours, is alone and finally gets up to exit the frame in the direction of a local party.

This indefinite relation, sometimes close, sometimes distant, between the (colonizing) Portuguese and the (colonized) African peoples is also explored in the scenes set in the capital and chief port of Portugal. It is noteworthy that Laura works at the Lisbon airport, a place that evokes the connection with other places. The film not only travels to Africa, but also shows African elements of 1980s Portugal. National identity and racial difference are indeed two intertwined themes of the film, politically as well as cinematically. When Alexandre takes his father to a nightclub where black men are playing vigorously, it is this same energy that reignites Raul when he dances with a black girl. "I haven't danced for ages," he tells her in confidence. Race relations remain uncertain because they have a history, if there is proximity, there is also distance. Laura goes for a walk with Raul and Piedade and it becomes clear that Augusto's mother resents that her son died in the colonial war. The father comments that to die like a soldier is better than dying in bed. "To die in Africa. . . . And then for nothing," she says. For Piedade, Augusto's passing reflects the worthlessness of the war. Raul's answer is an attempt to give significance to his life and death: "The Lord knows what he's doing. We never know what is for the better or worse." The mother looks at him between the two sentences and agrees with this fatalistic view. To them Africa and Augusto were so close and now they seem so far away—perhaps like God.

Religious Experience and Fatality

When Raul and Piedade visit Alexandre's apartment, the latter reads a passage from the same erotic short story that the editor had read earlier. The editor's enjoyment differs from Piedade's dismissal when the father asks her what she is reading. "Men's things!" she says, both hands covering the sheet of paper as if hiding it, looking away and around as if brushing off what she has just read, trying desperately to separate herself from it. A prevalent sexual moralism goes hand in hand with an erasure of female desire. This is not particular to

Alexandre's mother, since we can see this also in him. First, he has not told his parents what he does, as if he is ashamed of his work as well as the fact that he lost his job as a journalist. Second, his short stories are told from an exclusively male perspective, one that has no interest in female sexual pleasure. The film connects these cultural and behavioral traits with the conservative and submissive thinking associated with traditionalist Catholic doctrine. The possibility of enjoyment is assigned only to men. The music-hall entertainment that Raul, Piedade, Alexandre, and Laura go to see, between their arrival to the theater and their return home, is omitted. After this family entertainment, the women and the men go their separate ways at night: the women stay home and the men go out to the strip and dancing clubs.

The film shows that a religious meekness translated as fatalism and resignation remained deeply ingrained from one generation of women to the next, as represented by Piedade and Laura. When Piedade and Raul return to their house, she is seen in her darkened bedroom saying that she is staying in bed. Piedade's physical weakness is evident since the first scene where she appears, but it surfaces more strongly in Lisbon when she goes to Mass with Laura. Her lack of will is expressed by a disturbing immobility. Sitting on the bed, with the right hand over the left on her lap, her head does not move, her face does not change, only her eyes shift and are directed towards Raul when he speaks. Instead of sharing the same shot, Raul and Piedade are then captured in two different complementary shots, both visually and thematically: he is shown to the left with a figurine of the Virgin Mary on the right, she is shown to the right with a crucifix on the wall. He leaves to see the animals and she just whispers "Go ahead, go ahead," then slightly and painfully turns her head to the right. In moments like this, the emotional dryness to which Ramos calls attention reaches its culmination. Ramos relates these dry emotions to a sense of something unconcluded and unquestioned, writing that this is "um filme onde nada estremece e tudo cala e se ensimesma" (24).

The use of the same sacred music, Domingos Bom Tempo's "Requiem," links the collective look over Augusto's death of the previous scene with Holy Communion, comparing and contrasting his death with a sacrifice. His circular military identification tag is broken into two bits as the consecrated bread in the Eucharist, yet he does not sacrifice himself as a Christ-like figure, he is sacrificed by those who have sent him to war. The church altar is filmed from

the front as if it is a well-defined stage, stands out against the fragmented views of the striptease and music shows to which Raul and Alexandre go. This distinction does not mean, however, that the altar is the only space for the expression and confrontation of human weaknesses and faults, but forgoing human strength and confidence, or hope. Even Christian faith is incomplete, curtailed, an impediment to personal and social healing and progress. Piedade's bedroom is another one of those spaces, filled with religious objects. Even the landscape in Africa can become such a space. There is a moment when the band of soldiers stops and sits, as if meditating on the situation—a reading that is reinforced by the added sacred music.

Right before Augusto's death, the soldiers rest in a nocturnal scene in Africa, when Augusto starts singing a song for a sleepless night:

I've got different things I do when I can't sleep. For instance, I remember a river where I used to fish when I was little. So I fish there again, throughout its whole length I fish in my imagination, very cautiously, under all the trees, in all the little crannies at the edges, I even invent rivers. Some nights I don't manage to fish and I repeat my prayers and I try to pray for everybody I've ever known. That takes a lot of time. Because if someone remembers all the people he has met and says an *Our Father* and an *Ave Maria* for all of them, it takes a long time. And when I can't remember anything else, I just listen.

The song describes memory and imagination as shelters from the present nightmare, envisioning a river that is as far away as the river Mondego that is later taught to native children. Prayers such as the *Pater Noster* and *Ave Maria*, substitute these exercises, but are still based on the remembrance of the people he has met. When his mind is blank, he simply listens. *Um adeus português* puts us in this listening position from the start, when we hear Augusto's voiceover. We can ask ourselves, however, what exactly Augusto is paying attention to while he is listening. It is precisely at this point that he is shot. His dead body is our last sight of him, but the film ends neither with an image of death nor with an image of resurrection, even though there is a sense of awakening in death when the African soldier opens his eyes after Augusto is confirmed to have no pulse (Vieira 69).

Conclusion

It is crucial to consider the 1958 Alexandre O'Neill poem that gives Botelho's film its name. Botelho insisted on the title and even asked for O'Neill's permission to use it. The film begins with two verses from the poem: "esta pequena dor à portuguesa / tão mansa quase vegetal." The poem here seems to speak of Portuguese identity, a way of being, unchanging and unchangeable. However, the poem deals with a specific era of Portuguese history, a fact that emerges when one adds the three verses the precede those quoted in the film:

Não podias ficar presa comigo
à pequena dor que cada um de nós
traz docemente pela mão
a esta pequena dor à portuguesa
tão mansa quase vegetal. (*Poesias completas* 52)

O'Neill's poem speaks of oppression in Portugal under fascist rule, and the poet himself suffered greatly due to his relationship with a woman in Paris. This was not the only situation that gave rise to the poem. According to O'Neill, this was "uma época em que tudo cheirava e sabia a ranço, em que o amor era vigiado e mal tolerado, em que um jovem não era senhor dos seus passos (errados ou certos, não interessa)" (*Uma coisa* 259). The film recovers this poem in the mid-1980s as if to underline that a lot remained the same in Portugal or had been taken away after the revolutionary process. The two quoted verses speak to an apathy that has dominated Portuguese society and confined people's actions. The film dissects this induced state of indifference. The poetic subject reckons that the only thing he can do is say goodbye—say goodbye and stay in a castrating and lethal environment. Reading the verses and interpreting the film, it seems inaccurate to describe the cinematic narrative of *Um adeus português* as the conjunction of two opposing stories, as José de Matos-Cruz does following the press kit for the film: "Uma história de guerra (África, 1973) e uma história de paz (Portugal, 1985)" (220). This clear-cut opposition does not account for the way in which lifeless, absent-minded soldiers roam the theater of war in Africa and similarly numb people feel a helpless loss and a muted anger in haunted, 1980s Portugal. Instead of peace, it is more accurate to

speak of a process of pacification in which agitation is momentarily suspended but not resolved.

When Laura and Augusto's parents converse in a garden, they speculate about how he would be if he had not died in the war. Looking off screen, Laura concludes that he would be like them, "like this." In the same conversation, the father seizes the opportunity to say that they are doing all right. "We haven't got much to complain about," he says, resigned. "Nor to rejoice about," Laura is quick to add before the end of the scene, joining a sense of sadness to that of resignation. They are surrounded by plants in a filmic recreation or visual echo of the small ache "tão mansa quase vegetal" from O'Neill's poem. Throughout the film, we also see Laura contemplating the garden at the back of the building where she lives. In the same vein, the film appears to contemplate rather than analyze its characters. Ramos is correct to argue that the film is "plasticamente belo e emocionalmente seco; sem explosões, sem escapes" (24); however, it also works to expose the "enorme burraco" (Ramos 24) of incomplete memory that links the national and personal history of its Portuguese audience.

Um adeus português addresses the need for the Portuguese to dialogue with themselves and their history—and the complications and difficulties of such a dialogue. The dialectic between past and present, and the noted absence of what is between them, makes it clear that this is not only the story of a soldier, but also the story of a country. O'Neill's poem "can be linked to the laconic style of Botelho's film, where the representation—without dissimulation or euphemism—of the pain of Augusto's family, twelve years after his death in Africa, seems to condense all the pain of a country" (Noguera 220).

In the last scene of the film, António's boy comes to get Raul for dinner. This becomes the moment of the latter's confrontation with the past, and the caretaker's son symbolically takes the place of Raul's own son after the farewell in the graveyard, entangling historical and social issues from a personal angle. What happens between them is left unsaid and is not shown. It is left open. Raul is cutting a wooden stick with his pocket knife (repeating what he was doing while waiting for his wife's return from the cemetery in the beginning), and he then throws it into the water, creating small waves. This is the last image of the film: the placid water reflecting the surrounding trees, later disturbed by a stick. The least we can say about this image is conceivably its most relevant aspect: that an action in the world produces effects. In this

ending, we encounter a vision of the Portuguese people that Botelho explains in an interview: “A Portuguese person does not talk about pain, he is silent. He suffers in silence. We have this attitude of contemplation, not of action” (“Si la mémoire existe” 20). One notices a shift from the third-person singular to the first-person plural here, whereby Botelho includes himself in the characterization. Such a shift also occurs in *Um adeus português*. It is a pensive, dialectical approach to a problem of undiscussed pain and quiet desperation in Portuguese history that nonetheless respects the temperament that the filmmaker identifies with the Portuguese. On one hand, Botelho has himself conceded that the action at the center of his film did not hold much interest for him; on the other, however, he has also admitted that he was fascinated by “reflection on that action” (“Si la mémoire existe” 21).

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