

# Salão Nobre | Salão Pobre: An image-memory

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*Salão Nobre* | *Salão Pobre* [Noble Hall, Poor Hall] is an image-memory aimed at unleashing the imagination and encapsulate a potentiality: what is *yet not* but could *otherwise*.<sup>1</sup> It is a visual intervention into Portugal's colonial archive, understood here as the law determining what can and cannot be represented.<sup>2</sup> Such intervention is born out of a need to examine colonial "visuality" without reproducing its effects and eternalizing its spell in the present. It is part of a larger project of mine—a "visual archaeology"—a methodological critique, in which the image levies itself as the very object of its own deconstruction (Barreiros 2018).

Colonialism has produced a cascade of images that have been, on the one hand, vital technologies for the colonial process of knowledge production and have become, on the other, the foundation for a colonial imagination, inaugurating an entire "onto-epistemic" tradition, image-shaped,<sup>3</sup> that remains operational to this day.<sup>4</sup> Like other colonial and colonizing images, the murals in the *Salão Nobre* of the Assembleia da República do not illustrate arguments, they are themselves the colonial argument; they do not document colonialism, they are colonialism in action.

Commissioned by the Estado Novo and conceived by painter and contemporary art museum director Adriano Sousa Lopes (1879–1944)—who died before completion and never saw the work he had initiated being concluded by Domingos Rebelo and Joaquim Rebocho—these seven paintings are the perfect example of how the colonial *sublime* continues to operate to this day to the degree that they, as an assignment to bring the old Portuguese empire back into that latter-day of 1944, remain impassively sited in the Noble Hall of the Portuguese Parliament. We can only take this to mean that, in 2023, the Portuguese democracy, in its formal guise, still cannot unfetter itself from the disastrous ideological and geopolitical program that these murals embody. Populated by those figures which the 1940 Portuguese World Exposition's "decorative" school molded in plaster (Acciaiuoli 1998), all the while giving coherence to and serializing a pre-existing

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<sup>1</sup> I am inspired by Walter Benjamin's concept of "memory-image", its relation to shock and the image of lightening. Cf. Benjamin 1932 [2015].

<sup>2</sup> This idea is indebted to Michael Foucault's conception of the archive as the law of what can and cannot be said (1972).

<sup>3</sup> See, among others, Andersen 1983; Latour 1987; Said 1994; Mignolo 1995; Daston e Galison 2007; Mirzoeff 2011; Bleichmar 2012; Jay 2014; Hartman 2008; and Camp 2017.

<sup>4</sup> See Azoulay 2019 and Barreiros 2018, 2021.

colonial archive (Barreiros 2018), these murals go even further to “correct the Exposition’s modernist attire” (França 151).

They therefore immortalize an iconography that would be reproduced in the following years (Figueiredo 2017) and is still very familiar today. Here some figures raise their hands to Heaven, there others pray for miracles, further along a few celebrate Mass, hold the Cross, draw the sword, “discover,” lay down *padrões*, hold banners. But they never kill, rape or plunder . . . a wholly misleading iconography! Even the titles take on a celebratory tone: “Infante D. Henrique faz a entrega do *plano* das descobertas ao capitão da Armada,” “A *tomada* de Ceuta,” “Diogo Cão na foz do Zaire,” “Bartolomeu Dias dobra o Cabo das Tormentas, depois Cabo da Boa Esperança,” “Pedro Álvares Cabral *desembarca* em terras de Vera Cruz – Brasil,” “*Tomada* de Malaca por Afonso de Albuquerque,” and “Vasco da Gama *recebido* pelos emissários do Samorim”. The *plano*, the *tomada*, the *desembarque*, the *recepção*: euphemisms that conceal a history of violence while silencing the subjectivity of those “others”—entire peoples—who are also represented there, mostly in positions of subalternity.

In “cartoon style” and acid colors, the murals in the Salão Nobre are thus the example of an intensified “visuality,” simultaneously colonial and fascist, both in the represented object and in its form—a condition further compounded by the whole ideology underlying their commissioning (França 153). Nicholas Mirzoeff (2011) has defined visuality as a “discursive practice” via which power imposes the “sensible evidence” of its legitimacy. Such visuality, which aims precisely the “visualization of history,” molds a colonial “complex” to impose and administer authority, yesterday as much as today. This explains why Portuguese democracy still finds it so hard to untangle itself from such a morass. This “visuality complex” has endured long after the end decree of the Portuguese Empire, in 1974, being the reason why these images remain visible, in their eerie silence and to this day, stanchly in the main ceremonial hall of the house of democracy. The same hall which the heads of state from former Portuguese colonies are welcomed during state visits.

Thus, the mere act of formally and historically contextualizing them (Moreira; Martins Marcos 2021), will not suffice to challenge its effects today and may only mean a further deferral of history. Not least because during those same years, another painter, Almada Negreiros (1893–1970), was also painting an official commission in the hall of Gare Marítima da Rocha Conde d’Óbidos, spurred,

however, by an entirely distinctive formal and iconographic program.<sup>5</sup> As the first image those entering the country would lay eyes upon, Almada's murals are a modernist (and modern) counterproposition to the ones in nearby São Bento. A collective and more truthful portrait of those exact same years (Acciaiuoli 1991) and an image for the next (Barreiros 2007), Almada's murals were a precise antidote to the iconography discharged by the Salão Nobre.

The murals in the Salão Nobre are what can be called an image-archive – an image at the core of the nation's (colonial) archive or an image which is itself the (colonial) archive.<sup>6</sup> In public view still today along the walls of the house of democracy's main visiting room, they fabricate a post-colonial identity dependent upon a “visuality complex” at the core of which (colonial) power is exercised. In that way they eternalize colonial violence in the present, by repeatedly reinstalling racialized subjects inside the colonial equation and perpetually denying them the “right to look.” This raises questions that must be posed. What is the purpose of showing them today? Who is showing them today? And who still profits from showing them? Truth hurts before it heals.

So, how can we have a mindful and ethical encounter with the image-archive of the Salão Nobre? An intervention in and around the Salão Nobre could be a gradual process of reparation. It could initiate with the covering of the murals with curtains – at least when heads of state from former colonies are visiting (out of politeness and following a renewed protocol!). Secondly, it could involve events, performances, and exhibitions that expose the colonial genealogy of the murals. Third, it could include a call to filmmakers from Portuguese-speaking countries to contribute to the discussion through a collective documentary which, permanently screened in the Salão Nobre, could work dialogically with the murals. Fourth, it could prompt their relocation to a more secluded area of the building, informing visitors about their colonial-fascist genealogy.<sup>7</sup> Finally, it could entail an open call for ideas on how to reoccupy the walls left empty, embracing a cross-section of artists that represent the diversity of the Portuguese population.

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<sup>5</sup> For a thorough analysis of Almada Negreiros's murals at Rocha Conde d'Óbidos, see Mariana Pinto dos Santos (2020).

<sup>6</sup> In forging this notion, I extrapolate Joaquin Barriendos's (2011) concept of “images-archive.”

<sup>7</sup> This would not be the first time in the history of the Portuguese Parliament: the statue of King Carlos I, commissioned for the Chamber of Deputies, and the crown that topped the canopy in the former House of Peers, were removed from their original place during the First Republic, and are now in the atrium of the São Bento Palace.

Until these reparative steps are taken, this visual intervention *Salão Nobre, Salão Pobre* stands as a contribution to the deconstruction of the colonial archive as it endures in the present, while partaking in the long genealogy of “countervisual quilombismo” (Martins Marcos 2022). It is configured as a “dialectical image”: a mental (lightening) image produced by the collision of two images that remain unreconciled rather than fusing into a single, harmonic whole.<sup>8</sup> In reworking the actual image of the Salão Nobre to turn it into an hypothetic *salão pobre*, without the actual murals, I wanted to induce a (historical) tension. It is only by reworking images that one can speak of “reading” them. Like so, the image ceases to be just a “thing” and becomes a process, a critique (Warburg; Didi-Huberman 1992, 2011). In *Salão Nobre, Salão Pobre* I unveil the Portuguese democratic system as a system that fails to institute the intelligibility for which it stands.

To the *image-archive* that the Salão Nobre is, I counterpose the production of a prosthetic *image-memory*. This image-memory is a potentiality, a wishing image, an attempt to open the archive and unleash the imagination, following Azoulay’s (2019) call for an “epistemic re-orientation.” Such re-orientation entails an unlearning of the colonial modes through which knowledge and, consequently, power are reproduced. The image-memory of the *Salão Nobre, Salão Pobre* is a device through which the reparation of the past-present and the awakening of other past-futures is rehearsed. It therefore partakes in an ethics of care for the “other” and for our broken world. In the best interests of a history—a justice—which is yet to be experienced.

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<sup>8</sup> In terms close to those which Walter Benjamin (1999) explored: “It’s not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present hits light on what is the past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill . . . Only dialectical images are genuine images” (*Arcades*, Convolute N2a, 3).

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