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present



beatriz batarda

the murmuring coast

a costa dos murmúrios

a film by Margarida Cardoso

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The film



“The Murmuring Coast” is the first full length feature by Margarida Cardoso, a director who has stood out over the last few years as one of the most consistent names in the field of Portuguese documentaries. “Christmas 71” and “Kuxa Kanema”, her two most well-known works, already dealt with the issue of Mozambique, the first one being about the colonial war and the second one about the birth of the cinema after the independence of the country.

With this film, Margarida Cardoso returns to Mozambique, to the time and place she knew in her childhood, setting her fiction in the last years of a long and disastrous colonial war in which Portugal became bogged down, obstinately trying to save an empire that time had shown to be now impossible. It is narrated by a young woman who arrives in Africa to marry a soldier, and is a powerful story that uses the war as its starting point and above all reflects on the echo it radiates, a violence that after all contaminates everything and everyone around it.

“The Murmuring Coast” is a cinema adaptation of the most famous novel by Lúcia Jorge, one of the most prestigious contemporary Portuguese authors. The novel, published in 1988 in Portugal, has been translated into seven languages. Just like the book, the film revisits a moment in history that Portugal still sees as complex, silent and painful. However, it opts for a intimate and original point of view that is capable of bringing its universal dimension into the present day.

Synopsis



“Yes, it’s true, in those days that was what I was called... in those days Evita was me...”
Evita looks back on the history of which she had been part, and corrects it.

At the end of the 60s Evita arrives in the Portuguese colony of Mozambique to marry Luís, a mathematics student doing his military service there. Evita soon realizes that Luís has changed, and in the turmoil of the war he has transformed himself into a pale imitation of his commanding officer, Forza Leal.

The men leave on a major military offensive in the north of the country. Evita is left alone and, desperate to understand what has changed Luís, seeks the company of Helena, Forza Leal’s wife. Helena, submissive and humiliated, is a prisoner in her own house where she is fulfilling a promise. And it is she who shows Luís’s darkest side to Evita as she tries to draw her into an ambiguous relationship of destruction and death.

Lost in an alien world, Evita becomes tangled in a web of sordid violence, which has neither glory nor honour. The violence of a colonial age drawing to its end. A period of war, of loss and of guilt.

Interview with the director



When did you get the desire to make this film?

I read Lídia Jorge's novel, "The Murmuring Coast", in the early eighties, at a time when I wasn't thinking about directing yet. The book moved me for very personal reasons: it all happened in places I knew, in an environment I had lived through, that of the Portuguese military in Africa and of their families during the colonial war. I lived in Mozambique from 1965 to 1975, from when I was two to twelve years old, in Lourenço Marques [today Maputo] and then in Beira, as my father was in the Portuguese Air Force.

I only returned to Mozambique in 1996 and I was shocked by a society that was so destroyed and difficult to understand, by a people that were in disarray, without any dignity, a dignity that had been taken away from them, stolen... My personal story is always connected to that land, which after all was the place of my childhood, and I think that, for this reason it is difficult not to want to firmly answer the question "what went wrong in all this?" It went wrong for everyone, for the Africans, for the Portuguese, for all those who suffered from the absurd situation of colonialism. This "absurdity" marked many people of my age and left many of us belonging to nowhere really. My most intimate path is related to historical facts, to the colonial war, to the 1974 revolution in Portugal, to returning from Africa – events

that marked out and changed many lives. Even today there are things that make me cry a lot without knowing why, like seeing people fleeing, images of refugees, people having to leave their lands. They leave me completely upset. I think this has to do with that period, with a loss that is not only emotional, but also geographical. In Mozambique, to make things worse, the change was dramatic. You want to revisit the place where you physically located your memories, but you never find it... It is like something of your life has been forever hidden, in the pleats of history, and that causes a certain anguish. I think it was this need for searching, which is already present in my previous documentaries, which made me adapt "The Murmuring Coast". I understood that what I wanted to search for was there, at that time and in that place.

To what extent is "The Murmuring Coast", not being a story of your own, an autobiographical story for you?

Deep down it is, but only in the sense that my personal experiences, my emotions and memories – much more than blind fidelity to the adaptation of the book – that served as a reference for the film. For example, seeing the film now, it is clear to me that it is more about violence than about war. Because I felt the war, and I still do, as a sort of ricochet of violence, an echoed violence... What reached

the world I belonged to, which was the world of women and children, was an almost “domestic” violence, in this case coming from the men who had been in the war and who, when they came back, unconsciously exerted that violence on everything around them. Violence against women was very common, for example. It was always latent; one could feel it strongly and it was very offensive. Another example of the use of personal references is in the fact that the film is so closed, so indoors. Indeed, I always lived more in the cities, often only with my mother and my sister, and on our own we weren’t exactly going to go strolling around in the savannah... Except for the beaches, which at the time were the most favoured outdoor place for family outings, all the rest seemed to be very interior, closed and dark to me. It was all very oppressive, because also at that time a lot of soldiers were starting to get killed and in the hotel we were living in there was always an atmosphere of death. I remember young widows crying in dark rooms, comforted by other women and watched by groups of incredulous children...

Different peoples seem to have different ways of reacting to the traumatic periods in their history. The Americans, in relation to Vietnam, have explored that issue in the cinema since the beginning, as public psychoanalysis, a national exorcism. Unlike this, in Portugal the colonial war has always been a hidden issue, one that was hushed up and ignored by the cinema. It is only recently that this period of history and Portugal’s relationship with its ex-colonies has come back to the screens, almost always dealt with by a younger generation that manages to look at it in a different way. Why?

I don’t think this only happens in Portugal. The French suffer from exactly the same problem... The Americans are like that; they are able to stage their dramas very easily;

they are pragmatic. But even if some films are interesting, capable of doubt and reflection, the majority doesn’t reflect anything about anything, and only expose and depict the situation. The Americans differ from us because they don’t feel guilty. We really feel it. Not only guilt about colonialism, but also about lack of understanding. I myself, who feel good in Africa, feel that historically something indelible took place, that can’t be erased. This is reflected in the lack of understanding about that society, still today divided between those who live in the cities with a certain educational and economic standing, and outside the cities with a gigantic population whose social and cultural functioning is beyond us.

In order to talk about Africa it is always necessary first of all to explain Africa, which is a pity and is very reductive. When we want to talk about Africa, to deal with certain issues, we always have to take into account the terrible guilt of not doing justice to anything because we are talking about something that is not truly Africa but what we manage to understand of Africa, which is very little. The only way of dealing with this is to shake off that guilt and to think that if we are talking of universal feelings and emotions our chances of being unjust are more reduced...

In Portugal we don’t have a great tradition of dramatic expression and we don’t find it easy to depict ourselves, perhaps due to our highly confused identity characteristics. After the revolution reflection about what had happened on a collective level was: “So you went to war to kill our black brother; you should have run away to France...” well, most of the people who fought in Africa were from very poor backgrounds, they didn’t have enough money for food and they probably didn’t know where France was... This blameful historical interpretation led to no one being able to talk about the period for years.

Now, with the cultural development of Portugal but mainly with time, which heals many wounds, people are coming forward and talking about the period, not exactly

trying to reconstitute things in a complete manner or finding an absolute truth about the issue, but through more intimate and emotive reflections. And today there is the beginning of an acceptance of that collective imaginary. It is made up of several small things, and each one of them is a truth.

This story of the Evita who opens her eyes and discovers a bridegroom who is after all someone else in that context, not only him, but that the world is also something else – the scene in which Evita cries in bed in an upside down scene, a metaphor for a world that has also been turned upside down – is a film about the discovery of what?

Above all it is a film about the violence of a loss. Evita's loss is above all a loss of identity, of not knowing who she is there. The film ended up being the path of this woman who wants to try to understand and goes deeper and deeper and further and further. She doesn't approach from the inside; she is above all influenced by things outside her. And that path ends up in a manner that is not conclusive. Indeed, I didn't want and I don't like that type of resolution, in a final moment of liberation. You can't say that Luis's death at the end is conclusive, because he was already dead. When he dies he says off screen, "...they found the body of Lieutenant Luís Galex..." which is Luis's war nickname. For her he is someone who had disappeared a long time ago or who had never even been there. For me this is the most human and logical thing that exists. Perhaps there isn't a solution; things happen and then other things come along; it's just one more path. Essentially, what I thought was important was the issue of the return to the story of Evita's character. For me Evita is above all an eye. In fact she doesn't speak much, she isn't active and she witnesses. I wanted her to be a timeless character, without the characteristics we associate with the women of the nineteen-sixties, such as submission, for

example, so that she might be one of us, today. She is a mixture of what she was and what she is now, remembering it all. For this reason it is important for her not to really relate to anything, neither with the women at the Stella Maris, nor with the journalist who belongs to the world she doesn't know and that even disgusts her a little, nor with her husband who is also far away now. Being a timeless character also represents never knowing whether she is there or not. There is always a great doubt about the facts and about her own capacity to reconstitute them so long afterwards.

The book contains two tales. The first is a short story titled, "The Locusts" and the second part is "The Murmuring Coast", which I ended up concentrating on. They are very different. The first one has an almost oneiric register, a very mysterious view of history, and the other is its explanation in a more realistic tone. It is a revisiting of the first book from a current point of view, by someone who is looking at those facts from a distance, to the point of not recognising herself. When I started constructing the narrative line of the film I was forced to make a choice as the tone of the two were incompatible if it were not explained that there were two different narrations. So "The Locusts" were left only in the off screen narration of the character of Evita, who is talking to an invisible interlocutor, who appears to be the author of the story in which she was the protagonist.

Is the war, seen from this perspective, also a demonstration of how there are no aseptic wars taking place in a determined place, but that they end up invading everything around them, contaminating everyone?

Of course they contaminate everyone and everything, and over a very large temporal radius. The issue of war is strange for me because I only see it as connected to the human question. Deep down, what is hardest

for me to accept is the infallibility of that human characteristic. War is always absurd. At that time, despite everything, they were guided by ideologies, but today the true interests are becoming difficult to identify. But the deepest nature of war seems to cling to us completely.

Is the character of Helena a negative of Evita taken to the ultimate consequences?

In fact they are all the same characters. That was always my idea from the beginning. Both Evita and her husband, Luís, are passive figures. And there are two active characters, Helena and Forza Leal. In the end Luís and Evita are their shadows, and it is the latter, a shadow, that leads us through this path. If Evita were not purely and simply the representation of something she would be the same as Helena. As a character, Helena is overblown, with an intrinsic dynamism; we are not sure whether she isn't a little crazy... But when Evita looks at Helena she sees herself, she sees what she doesn't want to be. Helena tries to show Evita the evidence of their similarities. She tries to stick with her and drag her off to somewhere sinister... Luís and Jaime Forza Leal are also the same person. Forza Leal is the interior of Luís, and what is left of Luís is only a sort of body without a soul, an empty vessel.

The photography is extremely beautiful: the film starts out very bright, ethereal, free, on the open space of the terrace, and then it gets darker, becoming heavy, closing in until it reaches that cubicle, the place of death. How did the work process go, filming in HD?

Everything was well thought-out and prepared; the whole visual evolving of the film, on the level of light and the decor etc. Of course, in a small production full of economic restrictions it is difficult to be perfect and to keep to those premises, but I think it

was achieved. The idea was always to start with a warmer, lighter atmosphere, one that was more open and lead to something much more claustrophobic.

Between writing, setting up production and filming, this movie took four years. We had three months of preparation before shooting and seven weeks of shooting, three weeks of which in Mozambique. A lot of the preparation was done talking to Ana Vaz, responsible for art direction, and with Lisa Hagstrand, who did photography.

The option for HD was determined exclusively by my desire to get free from the restrictions of film. I had never filmed in HD and neither had Lisa, so it was a learning process for both of us. During the rehearsals I did the camera and Lisa would light the set using the monitor as a reference, as the camera visor is black and white and in fact I confess that it doesn't see much... Then when filming we swapped places. I would be on the monitor and she would operate the camera.

At the beginning I thought the film would end with Evita, after she recognises her husband's body, walking on the beach. But the film had to end in a closed space, so that's why it is at night, with the shots of the windows. I have already ended films like this; for me windows are a very symbolic image. They are things that go beyond us and that we see like this... it is a shadow passing by, a light being turned on, another one going off. We know there are "others", but our capacity to approach anything more intimate is limited. Because, after all, true understanding of the other is always impossible.



*The film
seen by the writer*



Margarida Cardoso has made a moving film for nowadays, in which the gaze is tinted with the red of blood. She spares us the showing of violence, even removing some of the brutality from the book and opting to transfer it into psychological effects. At a time when the cinema is saturated in violence, the message is that it should be given subtly, because after all everything takes place in the heart.

The book and the film would certainly have been different if they had been created by someone who had been to war, and had been through the experience of death and maiming, thus becoming definitively annihilated towards subtlety. It needs to be said: the colonial war was violent, and even had sadistic aspects. Its tragic component is that the families of those soldiers were there, so that everything looked natural, as if it were no more than a “chance event of sovereignty”. They were people who did not fight but who heard the stories, who happened to have lunch with a pilot and see him arrive dead a few hours later in a body bag. And that experience allows another type of reading of the events. What links me to Margarida Cardoso is that we were spared the concrete experience of war, and that is what allows us subtlety.

Among the several different gazes in the book, Margarida Cardoso chose one, a gaze of discovery about the reality of violence. The film could be called “The Instruction of Eva”. She takes that experience to a very high power, does so with extraordinary coherence, and remains faithful to the spirit of the book, as after all, the message is the same. This is a film about that war, but, being able to leap over time, it is in the end a film about all wars.

Excerpt from an interview with Lidia Jorge, author of the novel “The Murmuring Coast”

The Time and the Place

historical context



The story of “The Murmuring Coast” takes place in Mozambique in the early nineteen-seventies, during the decline of what was at the time pompously called the “Portuguese colonial empire”. Portugal, isolated and against the will of the whole international community, was desperately trying to maintain its sovereignty through military force. The Portuguese colonial war lasted thirteen years, starting in Angola in 1961, then in Guinea-Bissau and finally spreading to Mozambique in 1973. In 1973 Portugal had a force of 50,000 men in Mozambique in order to fight against the independent guerrilla movements, among which the Frelimo group was the most noteworthy.

Although it was multi-racial, Mozambican society was dominated by an extremely influential white minority that in a less sophisticated yet equally violent manner recreated the racist social model of its two neighbours, South Africa and Rhodesia.

The war, which was always minimised and hushed-up by the regime’s censorship, essentially took place in the north of the colony and in areas away from the major urban centres. This fact created an ambiguous and absurd environment given that the civilian population residing in Mozambique was not aware of the scale and the consequences of this war, and continued to live in a sort of “eternal colonial dream”, without realising the imminent end of this period.

Desire to put an end to the colonial war was one of the strongest driving forces behind the military revolt that took place on the 25th of April 1974 in Portugal, known as the “Revolution of the Carnations”, which re-established democracy in Portugal after fifty years of dictatorship. According to official numbers, over 8,000 Portuguese soldiers died overseas in the colonial war, and today it is estimated that about 30,000 handicapped veterans exist and there are 140,000 victims of war stress. After the independence of the African colonies over half a million Portuguese people who resided in Africa returned to Portugal.

Director's CV

Margarida Cardoso, 1963, Portugal.

2003 Kuxa-Kanema (Mozambique journal d'une independance)

(documentary) ICAM, Co-Prod. RTP / Filmes do Tejo (Portugal) / Lapsus + ARTE (França) / RTBF (Belgica)

2001 Com Quase Nada

(documentary), Co-dir. with Carlos Barroco, ICAM, Co-Prod. RTP

2000 Natal 71

(documentary) ICAM/ Co-Prod. RTP / Filmes do Tejo (Portugal) / RTBF (Belgica) / Lapsus (França) / Mezzo Images Plus

1999 Entre Nós

(short fiction) ICAM, Co-Prod. RTP

Best Film - Léopards de Demain - 52^e Fest. Int. del Film Locarue 99

1997 A Terra Vista das Nuvens

(documentary) Prod. RTP

1996 Dois Dragões

(short fiction) ICAM, Co-Prod. RTP