

Vicente Sanchez-Biosca

(Re)imagining African independence

2018

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/3455>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Rezension / review

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Sanchez-Biosca, Vicente: (Re)imagining African independence. In: *NECSUS. European Journal of Media Studies*, Jg. 7 (2018), Nr. 2, S. 309–314. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/3455>.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

<https://necsus-ejms.org/reimagining-african-independence/>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer Creative Commons - Namensnennung - Nicht kommerziell - Keine Bearbeitungen 4.0 Lizenz zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu dieser Lizenz finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a creative commons - Attribution - Non Commercial - No Derivatives 4.0 License. For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

(Re)imagining African Independence

NECSUS 7 (2), Autumn 2018: 309–314

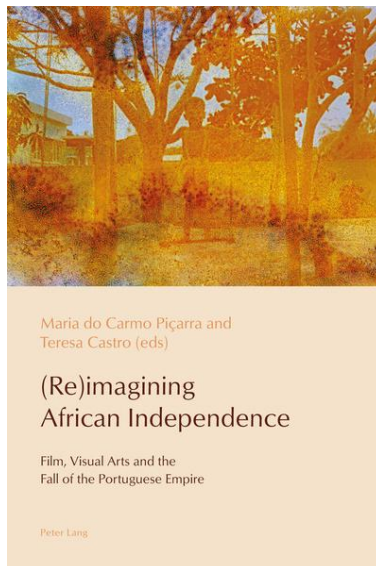
URL: <https://necsus-ejms.org/reimagining-african-independence/>

Keywords: Africa, book review, independence

In 2015, the former Portuguese colonies of Angola, Mozambique, Sao Tomé and Príncipe commemorated the 40th anniversary of their independence. In reality, the end of the Portuguese empire in the 1970s was as abrupt as its history had been exceptional in relation to the rest of the 20th century colonies: the length of the Portuguese rule in Africa exceeded by decades the downfall of the British, French, and Dutch empires, all of them related to the consequences of the Second World War. Thus, Portugal remained as the last Western colonial country; also, the breakdown of 1974-1975 represented the denouement of a bleeding war that had burst in 1961 in Angola and spread to Guinea-Bissau in 1963 and to Mozambique in 1964. The 1974 crisis was in fact intertwined (cause and effect combined) with the overthrow of the 48-year-long Salazar dictatorship, the Estado Novo (in power from 1922 until the carnation revolution of 1974). Moreover, the ‘anomalous’ last years of this extended rule occurred in the tense framework of the Cold War during which old and new national projects had to be negotiated in a transnational arena and with fierce political and military actors. This context is of great importance to understand in what measure the conflicts in the Portuguese African colonies were more complex than mere events, involving symbolic and cultural issues. These have to do with the ways in which the Portuguese *imagined community*, to borrow Benedict Anderson’s famous phrase, had thought its ‘civilizing enterprise’ in Africa as a project sustained by an ideal of brotherhood, hybridity, and miscegenation with indigenous populations deprived of any prejudice or racism. Perhaps the Brazilian sociologist’s expression of ‘luso-tropicalism’ is the one which best describes this myth, and it is no coincidence that the dictatorship rapidly made it its own. But the question concerns likewise the discourse of those who fought for independence and were in need to assemble in this process meaningful events, dramatic failures, and selected characters in order to found a heroic narrative

based upon traditions (invented or not) and supported by a coherent ideology. In this process, mythical events and sites of memory would play a vital role. Addressing the complex issues derived from this colonial imaginary is by no means an easy task.

The book *(Re)imagining African Independence: Film, Visual Arts and the Fall of the Portuguese Empire* (Peter Lang, 2017), meticulously edited by Maria do Carmo Piçarra and Teresa Castro, faces the challenge forthright. Its origin lies in an international conference held in January 2016 at the University of Reading (UK) in the wake of the above-mentioned commemorations of the 40th anniversary of the independence. However, on reading the volume, one comes to the conclusion that much work has been done between this academic event and the final publication. Two main aspects make the originality of the volume. The first is the postcolonial framework that the authors have adopted to embrace the Portuguese empire, which implies observing the phenomenon from a distance, taking then the events in a process of disengagement from the colonial syndrome. The second is the choice of visual culture as the focus of reflection, mainly cinema, but also television, art, material culture, and performative practices. As Piçarra and Castro state in their introduction, the book's aim is to 'contribute to a better knowledge of political propaganda films shot during and straight after the liberation wars' (p. 13). We might perhaps correct this exclusive allusion to cinema (most probably referring back to the Reading conference) and extend it to visual culture, as appears in many pages and chapters.



Not conceived as a companion nor as a handbook but as an academic project based on research, taking advantage of new archival sources and renewed methodological approaches, the hardest task for the editors was to provide an architecture for a book that is also addressed to non-specialists. In order to achieve this, they rely on the articulation between case analyses that gather a sort of synecdoche-like relevance so as to make particular films, art works, or exhibitions enlighten key points of the colonial experience and memory. The result is a kaleidoscopic view on both historical events and cultural issues, such as the fantasies and projects related to the fall of an empire and the birth of new nations. As a consequence of this perspective, the book has been divided into four parts, each one of them helping to give a framework to the 13 articles. A foreword by Lúcia Nagib and an introductory overview by the editors complete the volume.

The first part is titled The Birth [through Images] of African Nations, and is presented as a view 'in reverse shot' of the colonial period. Once established the imaginary condition of every national identity, borrowing Anderson's conception on the invention of a tradition and applying it to the emergent national impulses in Africa, these articles address the contradictory voices that were at the origin of the Angola and Mozambique national cinematographic movements. Creating a new identity for and after independence implies somehow enclosing traditional culture in new directions. Ruy Duarte does so in Angola in a project he labels himself 'cinema of urgency', torn between an ethnographic impulse and the political demands of the present. It comes as no surprise that some events are risen to the condition of icons for the foundation of a nation, as it occurs in Mozambique with the 1972 massacre of villagers at Wiryamu, a sort of immaterial site of memory in the 'liberating script' promoted by the FRELIMO (*Frente de Libertação de Moçambique / Mozambique Liberation Front*) discourse in Mozambique. Whatever their strength, not only national voices are called upon in this process: Brazilian filmmakers from the experimental Cinema Novo, as well as others from Portugal, joined the international communist intervention. That was also the case of the UNICITÉ involvement (the film enterprise attached to the French Communist Party), and the decisive contribution, in filming as well as in training the local teams, by ICAIC from Cuba. As the reader might easily infer, each of the authors filming in the colonies was inspired by diverse film practices, recurred to different stylistic devices and narrative points of view, ranging from re-enactment techniques to agit-prop strategies, and playing

on the border between fiction and documentary, or even in the gray zone between history and ethnography.

The second part – The Fall of Portuguese Empire: Foreign Gazes during the Cold War – emphasises the ‘foreign’ voices amidst the geopolitical tensions derived from the Cold War. The Portuguese colonies provide a theatre (among others, like Southeast Asia or Central America) for a belated war not waged in US-USSR battlefields. When in 1961 Robert Young and Robert McCormick launched on NBC their one-hour film *Angola: Journey to a War*, with footage filmed by cameramen having illegally entered the country, and including the after effects of a napalmed village bombardment, the eyes and ears of the world turned to this African country. The powerful Salazar propaganda machinery counter-attacked, depicting the guerrilla fighters as animals, and drawing upon all the stereotypes related to cannibalism and savagery that actually were at odds with the idealistic hybridity narrative used until then. But high politics and mass propaganda are not the only pertinent instruments to assess the colonial imaginary. The popular culture represented by the small screen is as much telling, as evidenced in US television series (thrillers in particular) set in Macao or, later on, in Lisbon; and this is also the case of the photographic records preserved from the various visits of Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu to Angola and Mozambique in the wake of the communist internationalist rhetoric. These examples are a testimony of the role played by Portuguese colonies and post-colonies in geopolitics and in the political imaginary of the Cold War.

The third part is titled Moving Images, Post-Colonial Representations and the Archive. Unlike Britain with its magnificent Imperial War Museum, Portugal unfortunately does not keep a specific archive collecting all materials related to the former colonies. Instead, one of the richest archives of the world, the Cinemateca Portuguesa, stores thousands of meters of film coming from many origins and ideological points of view. As the then-director of the institution, José Manuel Costa, explains the most homogeneous of these products is for obvious reasons the colonial propaganda produced by the Estado Novo: the film collections of the *Agencia Genal do Ultramar*, the footage shot by the *Missions in the colonies*, as well as the official production of the *Secretariado da Propaganda Nacional* directed by António Ferro. However, as previously said, the archival material goes beyond the field of cinema and many kinds of other images are incorporated by video artists and photographers. The re-appropriation of these images contributes to re-think critically what some authors consider the colonial amnesia and the imperial nostalgia

as seen through post-colonialism lenses. In this sense, material cultural practices, subversion of objects and memories through artistic gestures, home movies, and amateur films play a key role in showing the emergence of the past as a spectral image (as stated by Balona de Oliveira, p. 200). Not least, the imposing 42 episodes of the series *A guerra (A War, 2007-2013)*, which gives voice to the witnesses, projecting affects and trauma into the memories of the so-called *retornados*. In devoting him or herself to the task of repurposing objects, letters, and memories, the artist becomes a figure akin to a historian or an ethnologist.

The fourth and last part, Rethinking (Post-)Colonial Narratives: Artistic Takes, describes a significant change in perspective, even though it was somehow anticipated at the end of the previous part: it gives the word to artists. Daniel Barroco reflects on family photographs and recollections of three generations of his own genealogy (family frames, to use Marianne Hirsch's terms). These Portuguese workers became soldiers and participated in the intersection between private history and History. Filipa César recalls how she addressed her reworking of one of the pioneers of Guinean militant cinema, Sana Na N'Hada, and her unfinished films. And Monica de Miranda closely analyses the fate of an abandoned building, Hotel Globo, that has turned into a silent witness of history, a sort of a palimpsest of the tragedies lived in a symbolic enclave of Luanda for decades. Stuck in time and refractory to modernisation, this theatre of the colonial past and independence wars, represents in itself a gesture of resistance.

We all know that past events never really pass by; they rarely abandon the scene of history definitively. Apparent banal places, small events, and derelict buildings seem always ready to be disinterred and to acquire what can be perceived of as a disproportionate role in new discourses. For the same reason, family albums, private photographs, amateur and ethnographic films, soldiers' letters or *retornados'* boxes and suitcases, whenever they fall in the hands of artists and filmmakers, are triggers to evoke and summon the (re-emergence of the) past. Memory is inevitably pervasive. If this is true, the contemporary faces of visual culture, including performance, re-enactment, and repurposing, are ideal objects to re-examine, from the post-colonial perspective chosen by the editors of this excellent book, what was to be the last Western empire.

Vicente Sánchez-Biosca (University of Valencia)

References

- Hirsch, M. 'Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Post-memory', *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 14/1, 2001.
- Anderson, B. *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso, 1995.
- Piçarra, M.C. & Castro, T (eds). *(Re)imagining African independence: Film, visual arts and the fall of the Portuguese empire*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2017.