

Monument Palimpsest: Excavating the visions of the empire

Madalena Miranda

NECSUS 11 (1): 385–393

URL: <https://necsus-ejms.org/monument-palimpsest-excavating-the-visions-of-the-empire/>

A theme that characterises the artistic and public discussion animating Portugal's current cultural life centres around the questioning of colonial legacies and the possibilities of a decolonial present, as a variety of presentations, exhibitions, documentaries, and publications across the academic and cultural field demonstrate.[1] Different university projects such as 'MEMOIRS - Children of Empire and European PostMemories' led by Margarida Calafate Ribeiro at the Centre for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra mapped European intergenerational transits (also through artistic practices). 'The Photographic Impulse - Measuring the Colonies and the Colonial Bodies - The Photographic and film archive of the Portuguese Geographic and Anthropologic Missions' led by Teresa Mendes Flores, or 'AfricanEuropeanNarratives' led by Maria Teresa Cruz explore these interconnections.[2] Projects like these have been feeding the decolonialisation agenda for some time, including a major exhibition at the Gulbenkian Foundation titled *Europa, Oxalá* (4 March - 22 August 2022). All in all, these projects have been generative of an interesting interaction between the university and the community, resulting in a constant reflection and questioning that has been progressively absorbed by the social and political agenda. The theme of 'imperial' returns, showing once again how arts, creation, and cultural debate inform future and present collective strategies and individual tactics.

The itinerary of the exhibition *Visions of Empire* allowed one to retrace the historical landscape of such a tremendous history for such a small country. But in the case of this exhibition, such a return is the bearer of an important appropriation: it returns from within.

Visions of Empire was part of a wider curatorial programme that included the exhibition; a documentary with the same title directed by one of the main curators, Joana Pontes; and a film programme titled *Other Empires, Other Visions*.^[3] Photography and its uses in contemporary Portuguese colonialism is the focus of this project. As co-curator and contemporary Portuguese historian Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo explains, the starting questions of the exhibition are:

What do these images that have survived in the archives, in the street markets, in our homes, tell us? Why were they made? By whom? For what purpose? What do they hide from us?^[4]

The exhibition was organised in different chapters: The Fields of Science; The 'Others' Documented (and Displayed); Proof of Civilization, and its images of economic activities and developmental effort, such as the troublesome 'slave cocoa', but also the actions and needs of 'pacification', 'the difficulties of putting the indigenous people to work' – a quote from a colonial administrative, or religious education as part of the missions of civilization, the 'workshops of souls', as the territorial vision of The (Sub) Worlds of Development; the Cultural Practices and the presence of the military conflict on Wars on War; until the final part, *Visions of Independence*.

Different contributions come from researchers, visual artists, also texts from different points of view, including writer Mia Couto, or retired officer Aniceto Afonso, and social assistant and activist Telma Tvon. All of them offer a contemporary kaleidoscopic vision where the dialogue between research, artistic creation, and their public impact contributes to conveying a sense of 'permanent questioning'. The main contributions, also in the catalogue, include texts by Cláudia Castelo, Catarina Mateus, José Pedro Monteiro, Filipa Lowndes Vicente, Nuno Domingos, Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo, and Joana Pontes. Joana Pontes' film with the same title, *Visions of Empire* (2020), which was screened for the first time at DocLisboa 2020, organises these questions about some scattered materials, testimonies, and photographs, whose memory is amplified over the course of the film:

These were the photographs we brought back from Angola. How to look at these photographs? What do these images tell us now?^[5]

This collective constitutes a landscape of a post-memory generation that calls upon itself the responsibility of making visible and clarifying historical imperial landscapes from a contemporary critical, political, and epistemic perspective.

MONUMENT PALIMPSEST: EXCAVATING THE VISIONS OF THE EMPIRE

Back in the rooms and on the walls of the exhibition, these images interacted not only with the public but also within different layers of a monumental building and site in the geography and architecture of Lisbon – the Praça Imperial and the Monument to the Discoveries – where it took place. The backbone of the event, which is the photographic exhibition, exposes a monumental regime through the occupation of a monumental space in a palimpsest of meaning.

The monument – Padrão dos Descobrimentos – is a sculpture 56 metres high and 20 metres wide, with 32 side sculptures of seven metres each and the main one, Prince Henry the Navigator, nine metres high. This caravel-shaped monument with Henry the Navigator at its prow is a colonial monument, built to pay homage to the main figure of the Portuguese Atlantic expansionist movement during one of the most expressive moments of the Salazar regime's colonial propaganda – the 1940 World Exhibition of Portugal. It is a symbolic mark of Lisbon's geography on its western side, where the ensemble with the Jerónimos Monastery and the Belém Cultural Centre encloses the architectural traces of the Imperial Square, reinforced by the proximity of the Tower of Belém – the famous orientation Tower for transatlantic maritime traffic.

The occupation of the Visions of the Empire in the foundations of the Padrão dos Descobrimentos builds on this texture and becomes a central part of its experience for the visitor. To install and open the photo albums and archives, to interrogate them and make them visible in this place is an empowering gesture, expressed in this curatorial choice. Its history is relevant, as we can relate to the inhabitation of the exhibition space. The monument, built during Portugal's World Expo, also became a visual landmark of the city on the bank of the Tagus. Although imposing, the structure was ephemeral, because it was primarily built as part of the temporary ensemble of the 1940 exhibition. It took another twenty years, on the occasion of the celebration of Prince Henry's 500th birthday in 1960, for the question of its permanence to come up. It was then that the monument became a milestone for public works, and the ephemeral clay materiality of the monument was replaced by a new concrete and marble structure from local quarries.

Another detail of the episodic memory of this place was the need to arrange the surrounding space around the structure. To carry out this task, one of the architects of the World Exhibition in Portugal – Cristino da Silva – was invited. The ground was then covered with an ambitious Compass Card, where a World Map can be seen from a bird's eye view perspective. The outcome is the image of a colonial regime captured in 1960, on the verge of dragging a country into war against those who fought abroad for their

independence and self-determination in the second quarter of the twentieth century.[6]
The Portuguese colonial war was about to start in 1961.

Visions of Empire occupies this highly charged space of the Padrão dos Descobrimentos, and this gesture becomes part of the visit, like a counter-image of the monument. Step by step, the visit organises an itinerary that dialogues through the photographic settings with this exterior. Accessing the exhibition, visitors could also visit the monument, first by drilling and entering the mined soil of the remaining structures of the imperial fantasy, on the lower levels where the exhibition took place, and then going to the terrace where the viewpoint gives a panoramic perspective of the surrounding area of the Imperial Square and the floor of the Compass Card. The feeling when entering the exhibition spaces expresses this density, the narrow corridors, the small divided spaces. The gesture of this curatorial movement is amplified by this architectural encounter of the viewer with the exhibition. It begins with a descent to an underground floor, where the first images settle in the visitors' collective imagination.

The first set, the one concerning the scientific missions and focusing on the importance of photography from an early phase of the Portuguese colonial project – *The Fields of Science* – returns us to the imaginary images of colonial prospection: the uniform and the hat in white, the colour of the 'immaculate' presence of civilisation. As expected, photographic uses were part of the original design of the modern colonial project, and the scientific aims of the missions appropriated the camera as their structural device. One image draws attention to a set that paradoxically exposes dimensions, forms, order: the small woman, an administrative employee, with her stockings at her knees, measures the immobile population, subjected to its phenotypic instruments, rulers, weights, and a camera, as a scientific apparatus of colonial order (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Visions of the Empire. Author's personal photo archive.

The remembrance of the most remote time continues with the photograph of the coloniser, a Portuguese evocation of the 'explorers of Africa'. Serpa Pinto was portrayed in 1877, the oldest photograph in the exhibition. The 'illustrious' adventurer posing, with a child servant in the background. Another photograph shows him resting in an armchair, a straw hut in the back, looking vigilant for the camera. The second set of images, the Other Documented and Displayed, highlights other aspects portrayed, including highly charged faces and photographs of colonial families. As Bandeira Jerónimo notes, it is crucial to understand the project of 'ethnographic documentation' that organised in part the colonial narrative of such visual policies for the territories. The photographs of nude native women, for example, gendered colonial bodies. These elements are repeated in several others. Despite the discomfort, in one of the photographs, someone faces the camera and the subalternity of the asymmetrical gaze is diminished. Another disturbing moment is a photograph of a low-class settler family, in the middle of a dusty floor, an expression of despair on their faces. It leaves the impression of facing a displaced puzzle.

The Proof of Civilisation reveals the administrative imaginary, 'from Pacification to Pacification'; and also, under the ironic title, quoting a colonial administrator about 'the difficulty of getting the natives to work' appears the international denunciation of slave labour in the cocoa fields. In one photograph, a small group of men, one in the front

covered with minimal clothes, face the camera with desperation, striking the visitors through a silent encounter.

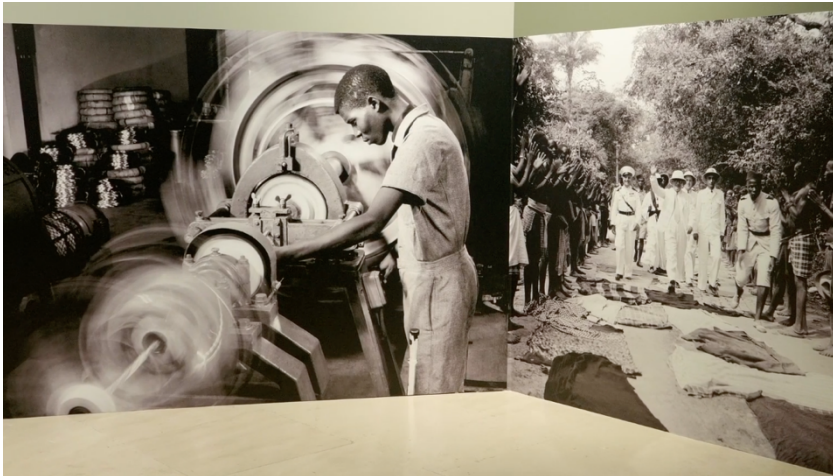


Fig. 2: Visions of the Empire. Author's personal photo archive.

The next group, *The (Under) Worlds of Development*, shows the role of religious presence in education with 'civilisational' aims. The images from the *Battle for Development* expose the contrast of territory – urban and rural spaces and a plurality of activities of the rhetoric of 'modern economic development', which supported the narrative of the overseas nation, central to modern Portuguese colonialism after the Second World War. The photograph of a Black worker in a factory crystallises this imagery: the worker's young face is concentrated on the high-speed wheel of the machinery, a set of progress.

The *Cultural Practices* section also presents a set of works organised around two poles: the recognisable cultural celebrations of the native populations as ceremonies on the grounds, with music and dance, are the former; while at the opposite pole, the images of colonial leisure, with pool parties and sporting events, fill the space. The next set, *Wars on War* exposes the centrality of photography in the conflict, on the one hand present in war propaganda but also on the individual and subjective uses by those involved: the soldiers and their families. Several images of war scenes, greetings, and holiday postcards highlight these different uses and visual circulation. Two soldiers play with a monkey during a break. A group of soldiers embrace a stone on which is written 'Here is Portugal'. The last set, *Visions of Independence* goes beyond the Portuguese colonial presence and presents how photographic uses by independence movements were also

MONUMENT PALIMPSEST: EXCAVATING THE VISIONS OF THE EMPIRE

part of an individual and emerging nation's identity strategy. The photograph of the blackboard in a tropical exterior, with someone concentrating on writing and someone facing the camera during a class, releases a parity that contrasts with the previous pyramidal composition of colonial classrooms.



Fig. 3: Still frame of 'Visions of Empire', 'Estudio no boulevard' / 'Studio in the boulevard' by Sebastião Langa, Ricardo Rangel, Lourenço Marques, 1962, CDFF – Centro de Documentação e Formação Fotográfica, Moçambique.



Fig. 4: Romaric Tisserand, Ultramar, (Empire Travel Club), installation, mixed media (2001-2014), poster, pigment prints, video and postcards, tamanho variável, variable size.

The exhibition also integrates, besides the contributions from different individuals on the theme, two artistic interventions by Romaric Tisserand and Myriam Taylor – a visual installation and a video commentary respectively, where the relevance of these portraits is re-enacted in new forms. In the opening image, a black assistant photographer, bending towards the camera, raises his head and looks at us, at the opening moment of the exhibition. This image synthesises the responsibility of combining rigorous research with a resistance to the forgetting in the public life of these images from the colonial past, as part of a present and future projection – the aim of this project; but it is also present and magnified when, once outdoor, we stand on the square, outside of the monument.

Visions of the Empire names an encounter from this set of photographs, but also from its curatorial politics. On the one hand, visions, as plural gazes that by occupying the Padrão dos Descobrimentos place themselves at the epicentre of an Empire's symbology. The monumental space is thus the site of an intervention. And its occupation from the bottom up is also a metaphor for the decolonial gesture of appropriation of these images and this archive. The palimpsest is heterogeneous, diverse, and of a prolonged effect since History itself and the photographic compositions are layers of these ongoing visions.

Notes

- [1] There was recently a debate around the Portuguese representation in the Venice Biennale, where identity politics were centred around the selection of the artist Grada Kilomba and Pedro Neves Marques, the artist that was ultimately chosen.

- [2] MEMOIRS – Children of Empires and European PostMemories funded by European Research Council (ERC n. 648624). ‘Photo-Impulse’ has funding from Portuguese Agency for Science and Technology PTDC/COM-OUT/29608/2017 (<https://www.photoimpulse.fcsh.unl.pt/pt/inicio/>). AfricanEuropeanNarratives is a Europe for Citizens project, associated with the Afrodescendence decade (<http://africaneuropeanarratives.eu/en/>).

- [3] The film programme was screened at the same place along with some classical documentaries about the theme, such as *Statues Also Die* (1953) by Chris Marker and Alain Resnais.

- [4] Video presentation of the exhibition *Visions of Empire* | Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo. <https://vimeo.com/593227994> (last accessed 22 April 2022, my translation).

- [5] *Visions of Empire*, trailer, *Vende-se Filmes*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wQXFYrn67Eo>

- [6] The compass-card materials, the precious rose and dark marbles were offered by the South African apartheid government.