

# *The blind spot of history: colonialism in Tabu*

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## The Blind Spot of History: Colonialism in *Tabu*<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This article looks at the film *Tabu* (Miguel Gomes, 2012) as an example of the negative use of cinema for realist ends. The film addresses Portugal's tainted colonial past by means of a relentless questioning of the film medium and its representational properties, whilst the horrors of colonialism in Africa – the main issue at stake – remain conspicuous by their absence. Indeed, *Tabu* gravitates around an irresistible, all-consuming black hole, where the sombre legacy of colonialism makes itself felt by resisting representation. This article analyses two opposites, but complementary movements in the film: on the one hand, the foreclosure of history, and, on the other, the grounding of the story in the reality of both the objective world and the medium itself. The aim will be to define a possible truth procedure, as defined by Badiou, contained in the film's self-defeating fantasy.

Keywords: *Tabu*; Portuguese cinema; Colonialism; Miguel Gomes; Realism

'We've lost a soldier and gained an artist'. (*Foi-se o militar, ficou o artista.*)  
Spoken line in *Tabu*

This article will look at the film *Tabu* (a co-production between Portugal, Germany, Brazil, France and Spain, by Portuguese director Miguel Gomes, 2012) as an example of the negative use of cinema for realist ends. The film addresses a nation's tainted historical past by means of a relentless questioning of the film medium and its representational properties, whilst the horrors of colonialism in Africa – the main issue at stake – remain conspicuous by their absence. Indeed, *Tabu* gravitates around an irresistible, all-consuming black hole, where the sombre legacy of colonialism makes itself felt by resisting representation.

An analogy may help to clarify this assumption. In the most ferocious days of the military dictatorship in Brazil, in the 1970s, more than a thousand articles were censored in one of Brazil's biggest newspapers, *O Estado de São Paulo*. Because the censored sections were not allowed to remain blank, they were filled with cooking recipes and, more notably, with long sections of the sixteenth-century epic poem, *The Lusíads*, by Portugal's foundational poet, Luís Vaz de Camões. These ersatz texts, though distant in time and space from the country's current troubles, were all the more political for the discrepancy they presented with the unpublished original, evidencing as they did the violent suppression of the truth. Watching *Tabu* gives a similar impression of a film with scores of blank pages, filled up with playful ersatz where political statements should have been.

Nonetheless, the subject of colonialism in Africa becomes clear from the outset. The film's tripartite structure involves a short prologue in which a Portuguese explorer's adventures in an unidentified part of Africa, among 'cannibals' and 'wild beasts', are related in voiceover commentary. This is followed by Part One: A Lost Paradise, in which Africa features again, this time in the person of Santa, the Cape Verdean maid of

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semi-senile and openly racist Aurora, who lives next door to the episode's third protagonist, Pilar, in present-day Lisbon. Finally, Part Two: Paradise, the longest episode in the film, is a flashback to Aurora's youth, entirely set in Africa. In all three parts the unequal relationship between colonisers and colonised is of the essence, and yet colonialism itself is never touched upon. Instead, whenever verging on that territory, the story is drawn back to the characters' private realm. Thus, for example, the explorer's expedition in Africa is explained as motivated by the loss of his beloved wife, rather than by any mission of conquest. In particular, Aurora's long-winded life story, told in flashback in minute detail in Part Two, involving love affairs, hunting, gambling and a pet crocodile, all evidently connected with her position as a European settler in Africa, precludes this very fact.

This notwithstanding, the view that *Tabu* is a brilliant film is widespread and corroborated by the host of prizes and critical accolades it has collected since its release in 2012. But in order to understand where the film's qualities actually lie, it is first necessary to ask: why does it refuse to call colonialism by name? What is the prohibition, or 'taboo', referred to in the film's very title? Needless to say, there were no bans on the subject of colonial conflicts, as was the case with the censored Brazilian newspaper mentioned above. On the contrary, unveiling the real facts behind the colonial propaganda in Portugal, particularly strong during the New-State dictatorship of António de Oliveira Salazar and Marcelo Caetano, between 1933 and 1974, has become the mission of a great number of artists and scholars in recent times, in the Portuguese-speaking world. A film such as *The Murmuring Coast* (*A costa dos murmúrios*, Margarida Cardoso, 2004, an adaptation of Lídia Jorge's eponymous novel), focusing on the Portuguese colonial war in Mozambique – which also provides the main locations for *Tabu* – is an eloquent example of this investigative tendency which culminates, in Cardoso's film, in the discovery of harrowing evidence of atrocities. In the Portuguese artworld, the study of archival images, from both official and private origin, has elicited highly innovative artworks by the likes of Daniel Barroca and Filipa César, authors respectively of the installations *Circular Body* (2015) and *Luta ca caba inda* (2017), which conduct a careful scrutiny of the artists' own subjectivities and complex family and affective ties with previous colonisers and perpetrators. This kind of research also informs Cardoso's *The Murmuring Coast*, which opens precisely with domestic footage of Portuguese families leisurely interacting with locals, in Mozambique, in the days leading to the independence wars. These artworks and films come alongside groundbreaking research, such as contained in the book *(Re)imagining African Independence: Film, Visual Arts and the Fall of the Portuguese Empire*, edited by Maria do Carmo Piçarra and Teresa Castro (2017), which looks at how colonialism has been abundantly and variously 'imagined' in film and photography in both Portugal and its former colonies. *Tabu* also plays with the idea of home movies as indexical evidence of historical facts, which are simulated in Part Two as a pastime activity among idle European settlers, but again here colonial issues are averted. As Sally Faulkner (2015, p. 342) puts it:

With both wit and lightness of touch, Gomes explores [the characters'] memories, qualities that are often missing in more earnest cinematic treatments of the weighty subject of remembering a traumatic past (for example socio-realist treatments). None the less, Gomes also turns the tables on the viewer. Not only must we fill in a fifty-year narrative lacuna 1961–2011 (the period of decolonization and shift from dictatorship to democracy in Portugal),

colour in the black-and-white image track and sonorize the silent dialogue, but also recognize that other experiences in the film remain taboo.

Taken at face value, the tone of playful parody and irony adopted in the film's purposely incoherent storylines, combined with its systematic diversions towards trivial personal fabulations whenever a social issue is at stake, would verge on the frivolous. In his favour, however, director Miguel Gomes explains that he had never been to Africa before shooting *Tabu*, hence his and his film's inability to represent colonialism as lived experience, but only as 'film', or rather cinephilia. 'In *Tabu*, states Gomes, 'there is this invented Africa, which is based on a kind of fake memory of Africa, for which we can thank classical American cinema' (Prouvèze, n.d.), adding elsewhere: 'My memory of Africa is *Tarzan*, it's *Hatari!*, it's *Out of Africa*' (Wigon, 2012).

And yet this phony fantasy elicits a sense of foreboding, of an ominous truth lurking underground, whose form and content remain unknown, but whose historical reality is unequivocal. This effect is obtained, this article argues, thanks to the employment of indexical and medium realisms. The entire action is set on real locations, in Mozambique, in the prologue and Part Two, and in Lisbon, in Part One. Though the protagonist roles were given to renowned professional actors, such as Teresa Madruga (Pilar), Laura Soveral (Aurora) and Carlotto Cotta (Gian Luca Ventura), others are simply playing themselves, such as the Mozambican villagers and workers in the prologue and Part Two, and the Polish young woman Maya Kosa, called by her own name Maya in the film. Improvisation is also visible on the part of both non-professional and experienced actors, all at the mercy of Gomes's usual working method of a loose script complemented haphazardly by chance events. There is even an attempt, in Part One, at identifying the film with the course of real life by means of the diary form, with title cards indicating day, month and year of each scene, which coincide exactly with the period the film was being shot, around Christmas and New Year in 2011-12. The film also displays extensive ethnographic material, consisting of documentary footage of local rituals, habits and farming routines in Mozambique, in the prologue and Part Two. Finally, long takes, aimed at preserving the integrity of phenomenological time and space, are employed in some key scenes as will be analysed below.

As for medium realism, as noted by Faulkner in the quote above, *Tabu* promotes a systematic dismantling of cinema's constitutive devices. Colour, sound, music, montage, dialogue, acting and storytelling are denaturalised order to expose the manipulation they produce. The exclusive use of black and white highlights the absence of colour; discontinuous storytelling triggers the awareness of montage; muted dialogues evidence the need of sound; and acting is often glaringly artificial. Medium realism is furthermore apparent in the film's cinephilic fabric, made of countless nods to other films, starting with Murnau's classic *Tabu* (1931), which gives title to the film (see Owen (2016) and Faulkner (2015) for other myriad citations). The use of the now obsolete 35mm gauge for Part One, set in present-day Portugal, and of the archaic 16mm for the prologue and the African flashback in Part Two, is a cinephilic choice that drives the film's visuals away from contemporary digital virtuality and back to its early haptic materiality. Black and white stock has long been a cinephile's *pièce de résistance*, particularly prominent during the 1980s postmodern nostalgia for Hollywood film noir. A programmatic example in this respect is Wim Wenders' *The State of Things* (1982), in which both the characters of film director Fritz Munro and his DoP Joe Corby fervently defend the black-and-white stock because, as Fritz explains to his Hollywood producer Gordon, 'The world is in colour, but

black and white is more realistic'. Turning his back on Hollywood's artificial colouring, in a film also coincidentally shot in Portugal, Fritz Munro – whose name combines Fritz Lang and Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, and who is himself a cinephile – helps us to understand how Gomes at once reveres and subverts the tricks of conventional cinema.

In what follows, I shall analyse these two opposites, but complementary movements in the film: on the one hand, the foreclosure of history, and, on the other, the grounding of the story in the reality of both the objective world and the medium itself. The aim will be to define a possible truth procedure, as defined by Badiou (2002; 2007), contained in the film's self-defeating fantasy.

### **The Historical Black Hole**

*Tabu's* first abrupt diversion from the subject of colonialism occurs already in the prologue, before Part One is announced. Though presented as the introduction to the plot, this prologue turns out to bear no relation whatsoever with what follows, except for a vague analogy between a man-eating crocodile here and a pet crocodile featuring later on in Part Two: Paradise.

It starts by presenting a dejected-looking bearded man, standing in a wooded area, facing the camera, sporting a pith helmet and a water canteen strapped across his chest, while semi-naked black natives walk past him carrying spears, trunks and animal cages. A voiceover commentary, uttered by director Gomes himself and often at odds with the images, defines this character as an 'intrepid explorer', crossing the 'heart of the black continent', whom 'neither wild beasts nor cannibals seem to frighten'. Natives continue to be shown, clearing the vegetation with their machetes under the explorer's apathetic gaze. According to the voiceover, he is there at the service of the King of Portugal and, above him, God. However – and here comes the first radical diversion from the subject of colonialism – the actual reason for his expedition is his heart, 'the most insolent muscle in all anatomy', that made him leave the land where his beloved wife had died. The deceased then appears to the explorer, in 'the garments that hugged her body when she returned to dust', to declare that far as he may travel, 'he will never escape his fate'. Following this, he throws himself in the river and is presumably devoured by a crocodile. However, this is not shown to the viewer. Instead, we see a group of native dancers lined-up in a semi-circle who, following the off-screen sound of a fall in the water and the blow of a whistle by one of them, start to sing and dance accompanied by drummers shown in an interspersed shot. The voiceover goes on to say: 'Night falls on the savannah, as will a thousand and one nights more', and from then on, a crocodile, 'accompanied by a lady of yore', became a regular apparition in the jungle. The camera then pans along a living crocodile and up the figure of the explorer's deceased wife sitting next to it.

According to Gomes (Martins, 2012), the character of the explorer is loosely inspired by the life of nineteenth-century Scottish explorer David Livingstone, who lost his wife to malaria in Africa, which is of little help in explaining this character or anything else in this prologue. Of course, this tale is there to be discredited, and so is the voiceover commentary, a curious mixture of official discourses from colonial times and children's adventure books. It includes a nod to Gomes' own *Thousand and One Nights* (or *Arabian nights*), the film in three volumes he would shoot thereafter and had already been working on then, loosely

based on the famous collection of folk tales that lends its sprawling portmanteau narrative style to *Tabu's* Part Two.

Then comes Part One: A Lost Paradise, with the image of a solitary middle-aged woman, later revealed as Pilar, sitting in an otherwise empty cinema, intently looking through her reading glasses (an odd accessory in a cinema) on the tip of her nose at what must be the credit roll at the end of a film. Thanks to the prologue's continuing music track, we are led to believe that the film she is watching is the story of the 'intrepid explorer' just shown. Thus, as history turns into a film and this into the reality of a present-day cinema, Pilar is introduced as a cinephilic alter-ego of Gomes himself, who until now was the primary spectator and voiceover narrator of the implausible explorer's tale. Given that in this section the film is set in present-day Lisbon, Pilar may well have watched a Portuguese version (or parody) of a Hollywood adventure in the jungle. Hillary Owen (2016, p. 64) suggests this could be something like *O Tarzan do 5º Esquerdo* (Augusto Fraga, 1958), in which a newly-wed working-class hero, struggling to make ends meet in Lisbon, dreams of being Tarzan in a tropical jungle. In Fraga's film, the dream shows the hero in a pond infested with crocodiles and other beasts, in a similar situation to Gomes' intrepid explorer. Another parallel between the two films refers to the music track. Brazilian tunes are played both during the jungle scene in Fraga's *Tarzan* and in the prologue of *Tabu*. In the former, we hear a noisy samba tune, a reminder of the jingoistic 'lusotropicalism' that animated Portuguese filmmaking in the colonial days. *Tabu's* prologue, in turn, features a piano version of 'Insensatez' ('How Insensitive'), a bossa nova classic by Tom Jobim and Vinícius de Moraes, here performed by Joana Sá, with the title 'Variações pindéricas sobre a Insensatez' (or 'Playful Variations on Insensatez'). With its excessive flourishes, in the manner of improvised piano-bar music, this piano version of the song emphasises the prologue's general parodic tone. Moreover, given that the song lyrics, absent in this version, refer to a lovelorn man talking to his own foolish heart, the informed spectator may find in it an echo of the melancholic explorer's 'insolent heart muscle'.

Though the prologue's story is self-contained, it resonates formally with Part Two: Paradise, dedicated to a flashback of Aurora's youth in Africa. Shot on the same black and white 16mm stock, Part Two is also narrated in voiceover, here provided by Aurora's former lover, Gian Luca Ventura. An apparent pun combining the forename of Jean-Luc Godard and the hero of Pedro Costa's Fontainhas trilogy, the Cape Verdean Ventura,<sup>1</sup> Gian Luca is discovered by Pilar in a care home in Lisbon and brought to see Aurora on her deathbed, but they arrive too late. So he retells Aurora's story to Pilar and Santa in a shopping mall café, after her funeral, and Part Two evolves to his voiceover narration.

Not only this voiceover, but the soundtrack as a whole is in fact what provides a connection between the prologue and the subsequent film parts. The song 'Insensatez', dating from the early 1960s, finds a parallel with two songs from the Ronettes 1964 album 'Presenting the Fabulous Ronettes Featuring Veronica' played in the other two parts, and in so doing introducing a clear reference to a historical period. The first of them, 'Be My Baby', features in Part One, when Pilar is found yet again in the cinema, now on New Year's Eve, in the company of her painter friend deep asleep next to her; she weeps uncontrollably as the song plays out loud in some unidentified film. The second Ronettes song, 'Baby I Love You', is performed in Part Two by Mario, Gian Luca and their band, by the side of a derelict swimming-pool at the party of a decadent settler in Africa, where the band covers for the authentic Ronettes performing in the soundtrack. The choice is not accidental, for the early 1960s mark the beginning of the African independence wars. In Mozambique, the conflict started in 1964, the same year the Ronettes album was released. The group's musical simplicity and

the naivety of their lyrics stand in stark contrast to the 'socialist revolution' taking place in the country, which would eventually wipe out Mario's fortune, as old Gian Luca's voiceover retells. In turn, Pilar's weeping to the sound of the Ronettes suggests her implication in the same tainted past of those European settlers in Africa, including her neighbour Aurora.

As in the prologue, the characters are silent in Part Two, though all other ambient sounds remain audible. Or rather, the characters' conversations, of which there are plenty, are muted and must be guessed from their exaggerated lip movements and gestures, while their story continues to be told by Ventura's voiceover. Owen (2016, p. 64) makes the interesting suggestion that Part Two could be understood as a 'silenced' rather than 'silent' film, citing as a possible inspiration for it another cinephile source, the film *Feitiço do Império* (António Lopes Ribeiro, 1940), a unique feature-length fiction film of the Agência Geral das Colónias, created by the New State regime and intended to document the lives of Portuguese settlers in Africa. *Feitiço do Império* shows Portuguese characters involved in hunting adventures and love conquests in Africa, but most of the film's soundtrack has been lost; the surviving fragments of the film kept at the Cinemateca Portuguesa are most likely the version seen by Miguel Gomes and his cinephile circle. By inserting the false handicap of the inaudible dialogue into his own new film, Gomes again attempts to divert the viewer's attention from the history of colonialism to the reality of the medium, all the while candidly exposing the gap in personal historical experience.

As Ferreira (2014, p. 42) reminds us, such strategies of self-reflexivity and anti-illusionism 'could easily be described in the tradition of Brecht as alienating, or in the tradition of the "essay film" as trying to activate the spectators in order to make them evaluate the characters and the issues at stake. But this would only be half the story'. The other half is, in my view, the film's structuring aim to convey the reality of the black hole at its core. As Carvalho (2014, p. 125) puts it, '*Tabu* asks us to think without telling us what to think', resorting to Lacan's *objet petit a* in order to explain and justify its false stories. The fundamental lack Carvalho (p. 122) identifies in it is, in his words, 'the residue of what Lacan calls the Real, that part of the Real which exceeds our narcissistic perception of reality [...] that residue, that otherness, which signifies a lack in our perception of the world'. Along the same lines, Faulkner (2015, p. 357) refers to something 'unrepresentable' in the untold backstory of *Tabu*'s characters, and indeed there would be scope to invoke, a propos of the film, Emmanuel Lévinas's (1991, p. 121) defence of, and respect for, what he calls 'the infinite alterity of the other', an ethics that would justify turning the focus away from the immeasurable plight lived by the victims of colonialism and towards an interrogation of the self.

On the other hand, and in tune with the director's avowed lack of experience in Africa and consequently of the colonial atrocities, the protagonists in the episode of *Tabu* set in the present day, in Part One, are all women, Pilar, Aurora and Santa, all of whom had presumably been kept away from and misinformed about the wars waged by their male counterparts. The only man in Part One interacting with these female characters is Pilar's old painter friend, who explains to her that he was discharged from the war effort in Africa, in his youth, because of his varicose veins – a disease far more common in women than men. As much as Pilar, who rolls her eyes at this explanation, the spectator should take this as yet another of the film's infamous detours, which ends with this pathetic comment by the painter: 'We've lost a soldier and gained an artist'. Given the dubious quality, as well as sinister appearance, of the painter's work shown in the film, it could certainly be taken as the makeshift figuration of some unexplained historical guilt.



In Part Two: Paradise, however, there are at least three important male characters: Aurora's husband, her lover Ventura and the latter's friend, Mario. But they all gravitate around Aurora, an autocratic woman notable for her unbeatable hunting skills. Aurora's husband is regularly away on business, leaving her free to enjoy sex with Ventura, even while she is pregnant with her husband's child, in complete oblivion to the convulsive political situation in the land. Mario, in turn, Ventura's best friend and crooner of their band, soon becomes close to Aurora's husband, to the point of Owen (2016, p. 67) identifying an implicit homosexual link across these three male characters. Indeed, Aurora eventually kills Mario when he gets in the way of her eloping with Ventura. Again, here, the characters' lack of direct experience of the colonial conflict is suggested by Ventura's voiceover, which says that he and Aurora 'met in secret while the others played their wars', thus justifying the film's recurrent diversions from the crucial subject of colonialism.

### **The Non-story and the Index**

However, if blank pages covered with phony stories is the path chosen by Miguel Gomes, this is certainly not the only one available for those filmmakers lacking in direct experience of history. A film such as Margarida Cardoso's *The Murmuring Coast*, which bears a number of interesting parallels with *Tabu*, takes an entirely different view. Here, the gruesome history of colonialism *is* knowable and representable, even if the point of view is provided by women who had no direct experience of it. In a similar way to Part Two of *Tabu*, in *The Murmuring Coast* the Portuguese women in colonial Africa are left behind in complete idleness, locked up in their houses or hotels, while their husbands are busy crushing independence movements in the hinterlands. Their ignorance of the goings-on is maintained by force, through mendacious radio broadcasts and printed news, fabricated reports from the front conveyed by the military authorities and most effectively by physical violence on the part of their husbands. However, Evita, the heroine married to the more liberal Second Lieutenant Luís, embarks, in his absence, on an investigative journey that culminates with her discovering a photograph of her husband planting a stick with the severed head of a black rebel on the roof of a village hut. Estela Vieira (2013, p. 80), drawing on Sabine and others, enlightens us that this photograph 'is in fact the superimposed figure of the actor on what is a real photograph from the Portuguese colonial wars'. Even if partially tricked, the image provides an indexical climax to the film, filling the gap in fiction with the piercing Barthesian punctum of documentary truth.

Nothing as explicit as that is to be found in *Tabu*. Nonetheless, its choice to locate the characters in real contemporary Lisbon, in Part One, should at least partially account for the revelatory power critics almost unanimously seem to recognise in it. Despite the stellar cast including Teresa Madruga and Laura Soveral, some of Portugal's most prominent actors, Part One is a documentary-like account of Lisbon, with its actual roads, airports, shopping malls and casinos. Some obviously improvised scenes show us Gomes back to his usual exercise in staying true to life by focusing on 'non-stories', without any beginning, end or purpose, that happen to common people as they go about their daily business. An example is Pilar and her painter friend's tour to Lisbon's Roman Galleries (a vast underground network built by the Romans and first discovered in 1771, during the reconstruction of the city after the earthquake of 1755). At a certain point the tour guide, looking straight at the camera, declares: 'For 23 years I performed my duty respectfully and with care. I buried 280 corpses. If there are any others around, I'm ready to do my job'. At this, we hear

Pilar bursting with laughter and then the camera turns to her and her friend, who protests: 'Man, do you talk nothing but nonsense?' The whole episode defies logical explanation, but is left there as a sudden burst of real life, in the figure of an actual gravedigger the film crew stumbled on and let evolve in front of the camera whilst documenting the real location of the Roman Galleries, a rare sight given that it only opens to the public once a year.

The same kind of procedure is at play in the episode of Maya, a Polish backpacker and a member of the Taizé sect, who is expected to spend Christmas time in Pilar's flat. She meets her at the airport, but, surprisingly, the girl pretends not to be Maya, but Maya's friend, in charge of informing Pilar that Maya is not coming anymore. Her Polish friends, waiting nearby, then call her by the name 'Maya', and the girl disappears with them. One more nonsensical tale, with no other apparent function than to give an authentic Polish girl the opportunity to improvise before the camera, in a life-like, hesitant way, including her repetitive utterances. Both Maya and the Roman Galleries episodes evidence not only indexical but also medium realism, by defying cinema's narrative rules and aligning the film to what Lyotard calls 'acinema', which 'rejects the process of selection and elimination' and accepts 'what is fortuitous and unstable' (Lyotard, 1986, p. 349).

Thus, systematically, fantasy is made to spring up from the phenomenological real, for example, in the scene of Aurora's introduction to the spectator. She has gambled her last penny in a casino and phones up Santa at home to come to her rescue. Santa appeals to their neighbour Pilar, who has a car and drives with her to the casino. The scene at the real Casino Estoril, the biggest in Europe, 18km away from Lisbon, is recorded with documentary precision. Santa stays in the car, while Pilar joins Aurora for tea at a table placed on a revolving platform, a real feature of one of the casino's cafés. Aurora, in a riveting performance by Several, then recounts to Pilar a dream in which her home is found invaded by monkeys, fighting and biting each other. She fears that her estranged daughter might come by and discover that she has been eaten by the monkeys, but then she is suddenly in the house of a friend – already dead for ten years – whose husband also resembles a monkey, but one that speaks. She is disappointed to realise that her friend is betraying her monkey-husband, albeit with other dead souls, some of them foreign celebrities. 'Lucky at gambling, unlucky in love' is the phrase uttered by the friend that persuades her to go gambling again. Captured mostly in one long take lasting for nearly three minutes, a procedure that since Bazin has been deemed the realistic device par excellence, Aurora's simian fantasy gives flesh and bone, in a convoluted way, to her prejudices against Africans, in particular Santa, who Aurora believes is plotting her death. On the formal level, the casino scene is Hollywood back to front in that the sliding backdrop behind Aurora and Pilar grounds in the reality of the casino the mechanism of the rear projection, a trick employed in the old days of American cinema to simulate movement in standstill, and whose clumsy artificiality is so evident that Laura Mulvey once described it as 'smuggling something of modernity' into the classical form (2012, p. 208). Here, instead, it is the classical fantasy that is smuggled into the modern realist procedure of the long take, and deconstructed through its superimposition onto reality.

On the level of the fable, what characters such as Aurora are trying to do is to tame reality by means of fantasy, as can be didactically seen in Part Two, when Aurora and her lover Ventura play at finding animal shapes in the clouds in Africa, and sketches of these animals – a monkey, a crocodile and a lamb – are superimposed on the clouds. While these might be the characters' favourite pets in Africa and the object of their domineering drive, the clouds refuse to fit entirely into the superimposed drawings, as much as Africa

withdraws itself from the colonisers' (and the film's) idea of it. Steven Shaviro (2014, p. 71) states, in defence of the current known as 'speculative realism':

The real as such is nonconceptual, and the difference between the real and our concepts of it cannot itself be conceptualized. Our concepts are always inadequate to the objects that they refer to and that they futilely endeavour to circumscribe.

In its figuration of the inadequacy of fantasy to represent the real, *Tabu* is, conceptually, realist.

In fact, in its recurrence, the pet crocodile functions as a cinephilic metaphor of Africa. In Part Two, the baby crocodile offered to Aurora by her husband soon becomes a dangerous big animal that frequently escapes the pond purposely built for it. That it might end up devouring the intrepid explorer, as seen in the prologue, is only to be expected.

Aurora's misguided attempt at applying her fantasies onto reality is further illustrated by her belief that Santa is plotting her death behind her back, a suspicion fuelled by the fumes emanating from Santa's nocturnal activities, described by Aurora as 'macumba' (witchcraft). The realist translation of this persecutory fantasy is however provided in the form of Santa having an innocent cigarette after a meal and reading *Robinson Crusoe* in a children's edition, in order to improve her literacy in the language of the former colonisers. The scene closes with an eloquent still-life composition, comprising the shells from the prawns she has just eaten, the book *Robinson Crusoe* and a pack of Águia cigarettes, complete with the label 'Smoking kills' (*Fumar mata*), implying that, if Santa is risking anyone's life, it is only her own.

### **Fantasy as Truth Procedure**

One could speak of a structural fear in the film that places its core-subject under prohibition or taboo. Pilar, Aurora and Santa are linked to each other through a knowledge they cannot touch upon but which binds them together inextricably. The film provides a vague figuration for it, in the shape of the Mount Tabu, which seems to be (but is not confirmed as such) a hazy peak in the mountain range in the horizon of Aurora's African farm. Old Aurora, in Part One, is constantly assaulted by guilty feelings and claims to have blood on her hands, and in Part Two we learn that she once committed a murder. But Pilar, depicted as a selfless good Samaritan, is strangely supportive of her guilty neighbour, even transgressing a minute of silence, in honour of the refugee victims she works for, to pray out loud to Saint Anthony, at Aurora's request. Aurora, in turn, though dreading Santa, insistently seeks physical contact with her, most touchingly at the end, when on her deathbed she draws the name of Ventura with her finger in Santa's palm. At the same time, these elderly characters are openly rejected by the younger generation. Aurora's daughter born in Africa, at the time she was involved with Ventura, now lives in Canada and cannot spare more than 15 minutes for her mother when visiting Lisbon over Christmas, as we hear from Pilar. Pilar, in turn, is rejected by the young Maya who pretends to be somebody else in order to spend the Christmas holidays with her friends instead. Finally, old Ventura, now living in Lisbon, has been abandoned by his nephew (a belligerent-looking type, surrounded by dangerous dogs) in a care home.

The respect the film demonstrates towards these old characters' silenced knowledge could then perhaps be theorised in terms, not of a fear, but of a courage to face the void, the unknown, the nothingness that nauseated Sartre's characters. Elaborating on Heidegger's phenomenology, Sartre (1992, p. 17) states, in his magnum opus *Being and Nothingness*, that, even if unknowable, nothingness can be understood:

There exist [...] numerous attitudes of 'human reality' that imply a 'comprehension' of nothingness: hate, prohibitions, regret, etc. For 'Dasein' there is even the possibility of finding oneself 'face to face' with nothingness and discovering it as a phenomenon: this possibility is anguish.

It is a mixture of hate, prohibition, regret and anguish that forms the atmosphere of *Tabu*, emanating from characters faced with a void they cannot name or explain except through nonsensical fantasy. On the level of the fable, this void could be simply defined as guilt, as expressed by Aurora. On the level of the film as medium, however, it is the unexpected encounter with a truth that presents itself within representation. Badiou's 'regime of truths', at the base of what I have termed an 'ethics of realism' (Nagib, 2011), may be of help here too. Badiou (2002, p. 32) defines truth as an 'incalculable novelty' that bores 'a hole in established knowledge'. Truth in turn is governed by the notion of 'event': 'To be faithful to an event', Badiou (p. 41) says, 'is to move within the situation that this event has supplemented, by *thinking* ...the situation "according to" the event'. Such notions of 'event' and 'situation' are applicable to *Tabu* if the 'event of truth' is understood as the uncontrollable documentary facts that burst into the 'situation', that is, the film's narrative construction. A situation, according to Badiou (2006, p. 174), can only occur once all multiple singularities are presented at the same time, constituting a 'state' in the Marxist sense as well as in the common sense of 'status quo' (Hallward, 2002, p. ix). For its representational character, the situation is thus endowed with a normative element which does not hold any truths in itself,

precisely because a truth, in its invention, is the only thing that is *for all*, so it can actually be achieved only *against* dominant opinions, since these always work for the benefit of some rather than all. (Badiou, 2002, p. 32)

Therefore a truth, says Badiou (2007, p. xii) elsewhere, 'is solely constituted by rupturing with the order which supports it, never as an effect of that order', that is to say, by the emergence of the unpredictable event. The ethical subject, in turn, is characterised by 'an active fidelity to the event of truth' (p. xiii), which Badiou (2002, p. 35), echoing Sartre, derives from a choice, 'the same choice that divides [...] the courage of truths from nihilism'. The libertarian tone of Badiou's statement reverberates throughout *Tabu*. Beyond any particular political orientation it may embrace, the film is actively committed to the truth of the profilmic event, that part that cannot and will not be controlled by the cinematic apparatus, or by pre-existing cinephilia or by any a priori knowledge on the part of the filmmaker.

A perfect illustration is the ritual performed by the group of African musicians and dancers after the death of the 'explorer', mentioned at the start of this chapter. Edited as if the performers were reacting to his death, in mourning or celebration, this documentary scene, shot in ethnographic style, with didactic close-ups of beating hands and stamping feet, is flagrantly disconnected from whatever fiction it is edited within.

Beyond any parody, these men and women, performing solely for the sake of the camera (and not of the fiction), reveal themselves as totally unknowable others, hence as an event of truth that dismantles the faux legend of the Portuguese explorer sacrificing himself for love.

In conclusion, I would say that in *Tabu* all is laughable, but there is no reason to laugh, given the enormity of the task it places in front of our eyes: thousands of blank pages to be filled out, not with our imagination, but with historical truth.

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<sup>1</sup> The Fontainhas Trilogy is director's Pedro Costa monumental work on the lives of African immigrants in Lisbon, including: *In Vanda's Room* (*No quarto de Vanda*, 2000), *Colossal Youth* (*Juventude em marcha*, 2006) and *Horse Money* (*Cavalo dinheiro*, 2014).