Framer Framed in “A Tendency to Forget”

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Abstract

Evoking Trinh T. Min-ha’s book title, this paper focuses on how, in the artwork ‘A tendency to forget’ Ângela Ferreira reverses the gaze, transforming the ethnographic work of Jorge and Margot Dias into her research study. Not completely acritical to Anthropology and its primitivisms, modern Ethnography as seen by Clifford and its methodologies seemed increasingly suitable to artists after the 1960’s to work and respond to the fragmented world, and participant observation, fieldwork and the archive were adopted as methodological tools to experience, interpret and represent different cultures. The archival impulse has become central to many contemporary art practices since the 1980’s and the retrieval of lost historical information and the will to establish links between different events are some of the strands of this practice as defined by Foster in his seminal essay. For the critic Mark Godfrey the working with ruins and fragments of the past and the appropriation of the archive are important research tools for the ‘artists as historians’ who, through their work, propose an ‘alternative’ knowledge of history. Intrigued by the absence of a critical discourse about the country’s colonial past, but at the same time conscious of the need to question the histories and representations of the past in order to get a different understanding of the present, the artist Ângela Ferreira has consistently engaged with episodes of Portuguese Colonial history to point to its lacunae or inconsistencies. The work ‘A tendency to forget’ is part of her practice based PhD research, in which by focusing on the Dias’, the artist points to the hidden political agenda of their ethnographic fieldwork in Mozambique, in an invitation to think about the past, to establish connections between events, characters and objects and to assemble these into an ‘alternative’ narrative of the colonial past and memory, different from the version disseminated in the wider cultural field.

Keywords: archive; memory; ethnography; colonial.

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Michel Foucault has defined the archive as being ‘the law of what can be said’ (Foucault, 2006) which governs what is said, transformed, used and conserved. According to Jacques Derrida, the ‘economy of memory’ directs us to the place where the memory of society is deposited (Derrida, 1996). The contents of archives provide a means through which people can question history and position themselves in relation thereto, becoming an important zone of interaction. The interest in the archive becomes quite evident if one looks at the art practices and researches, exhibitions and publications of recent decades.

For the art critic Mark Godfrey, the appropriation of the archive and the work around the ruins of the past is an important methodological research tool for the ‘artist-historian’ who proposes an alternative knowledge of history. Godfrey reminds that knowledge is always a process of learning and unlearning which for the artist-historian, is a continuous process of questioning not only what we know, but also how we came to know what we know (Godfrey, 2007).

In his seminal essay An Archival Impulse, Hal Foster (2004) identifies some of the lines that define the archival turn in contemporary art. According to the critic, this kind of art practice seeks to restore historic memories that might go lost by making them physically present and by placing the information in new contexts to be interpreted by viewers. It also evinces the will to establish connections and to relate different events and meanings.

Since the 1990’s much of the work by visual artist Ângela Ferreira evidences this will to establish connections and offer alternative readings in relation to issues and episodes of Portugal’s colonial past and memory.² At that time, contrary to what was happening in other former colonising countries, the post-colonial discourse was insipient in Portugal from a theoretical and artistic point of view. Among the pioneers in introducing a critical debate around the country’s colonial past, was Manuela Ribeiro Sanches. In fact, it was an article published in the book ‘Portugal não é um país pequeno’ by Ribeiros Sanches, specifically an article by Harry G. West, an American anthropologist and academic that was the starting point of the research that led to one of Ferreira’s most recent installations titled A tendency to forget (2015), on which we shall focus in what follows.³

The work is the result of a long investigative practice in the framework of a doctoral thesis concerned with the question of how research-based art practice can contribute to rethinking the post-colonial condition. The installation presents features that we have become accustomed to when dealing with Ferreira’s work: a sculpture that departs from a reflection on architecture because, as the artist states ‘buildings can be read

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³ The work, developed within the framework of the doctoral theses, was shown at ‘Museu Berardo’ in Lisbon (June/October 2015) and nominated for and recipient of the ‘Novo Banco Photo Award’.
as political texts’ (Ferreira, 2014). As with previous works, the sculpture also serves as a screening surface, only this time the structure is suspended from the ground. A staircase invites viewers to ascend into a small-scale auditorium in which a short film is shown, to which we shall return later. In the photographic documentation that accompanies the installation and complements the conceptual reading, the artist invites us to do, we see where the sculpture has been ‘inspired’ in, namely the façade of the building that housed the former Overseas Ministry (Ministério do Ultramar) in Lisbon. The building housed the department that was responsible for administering the former Portuguese colonies and is located directly opposite to the Museum of Ethnology, also shown in the photographs. It was perhaps the proximity of the two buildings, the triggered the artist’s research, looking for a possible link between the two buildings that could reflect Ethnology’s implication in the colonial project. The Museum of Ethnology was founded in 1965 and was, in the initial years, run by the renowned Portuguese anthropologist António Jorge Dias. Through the assemblage of different elements, namely sculpture, photography and video, the artist attempts to point to a hidden history about the relation between the two buildings and to the anthropologist’s relation to the political regime of Estado Novo. This link was first established by Harry West in his article “Inverting the Camel’s hump. Jorge Dias, His Wife, Their Interpreter and I”.

Jorge Dias’ team included his wife Margot Dias, a German ethnomusicologist turned ethnographic filmmaker whom he had met during his study time in Germany between 1938 and 1944. Sometime after his return to Portugal, Jorge Dias was invited to lead the Mission for the Study of Ethnic Minorities⁴ also known as MEMEUP. This mission depended from a research unit integrated in the Higher Institute for Overseas Studies⁵ which on its turn functioned under the Overseas Ministry. It is in this context that the Dias team composed of Jorge Dias, his wife and Manuel Viegas Guerreiro, performed fieldwork in Northern Mozambique between 1956 and 1960 with the purpose of studying the Makonde people. The study was published in four volumes under the title ‘Os Maconde de Moçambique’ between 1964 and 1970, and became a classic in Portuguese Anthropology, which brought the team widespread recognition from the academia and peers (West, 2006).

During his own research in Mozambique on the Makonde and having encountered the same translator that the Dias had worked with, Harry West found that the presence and the work of the Dias team was continuously and inevitably evoked by the people he encountered. Thus West decided to make the two anthropologists his own ethnographical subject and researched extensively on Jorge Dias and his team. What emerged by the end of West’s investigation was that, at the end of each field trip to Mozambique for the Mission, Dias’ team elaborated a ‘confidential’ report which was submitted to the Overseas Ministry. It is the content of these reports, in some ways considered ‘explosive’ that gained Dias, according to West, the critique of betraying the

⁴ Missão de Estudos de Minorias Étnicas (MEMEUP).
⁵ Instituto Superior de Estudos Ultramarinos.
trust of his ethnographic informants and of collaborating with the Portuguese colonialist regime.

Along the path initiated by Harry West, in A tendency to Forget, Ângela Ferreira also reverses the ethnographic gaze, transforming the ethnographic work of Jorge and Margot Dias into her research study. In the film that integrates the installation, the reversal strategies are multiple. To contradict the common acknowledgement and repeated statements by the Dias themselves, who claimed that their work was apolitical, the artist introduces the hidden intention or agenda of the field trips, resorting to the content of the aforementioned confidential political reports. Furthermore, the film also reveals the content of the field diaries that Margot Dias kept during the 5 trips to Mozambique. The contents are narrated respectively by a male and a female voice, the latter with a noticeable German accent. What strikes is the contradictory nature of the two contents that reveal the complexities of ‘resisting to’ and at the same time ‘working with’ and ‘within’ the constraints of the political regime, with the ‘natural’ consequences. Indeed while the team provided information of political nature, they didn’t refrain from criticising the Portuguese Colonisers, who according to them were rude, brutal, uneducated and racists. The ethnographers would also criticise the colonial politics in terms of forced labour, education and pricing systems.6 Passages like the following are revealing of the duplicity, ambiguity and ambivalence of the Dias project:

“Although we are not politicians, and we are reluctant to venture into domains unrelated to our professional interests, we are required to do so, given the close relationship between the political and the social.” (Ferreira, 2015).7

At the same time, the artist interweaves Margot Dias’ ethnographic films on the Makonde puberty rites, with images of a documentary portraying, in a nostalgic key, the life of the colonizers in Mozambique in the 1960’s. The combination of the two types of footage functions as a device that ‘frames the framer’, considering that the documentary footage used in a Tendency to Forget was shot more or less at the same time the team travelled to Mozambique. On a different level, because the use of Margot Dias’ archival images, withdrawn from the social context in which they were filmed and unaccompanied by any written ‘expert’ commentary, would tend to a merely artistic or exotic appropriation, the artist resorts to the pixilation of the shown bodies and faces.

Expeditions with scientific and ethnographic purposes gave rise to different archives, which, according to Manuel Ribeiro Sanches, ‘must not be seen separately from their instrumental function of legitimising racialism in representations of ‘under-developed’ cultures that

6 According to Harry West’s the content of the political reports in itself may have not been of great political relevance. In his own words “any fair judgement of the confidential reports of the MEMEUP must lead to the conclusion that the gathering of confidential information by Dias’ team was little efficient, if not mediocre” (p. 167) (my translation).

7 Intertitle in A Tendency to Forget (2015) referring to an excerpt of the 1959 Campaign Report by António Jorge Dias, Manuel Viegas Guerreiro and Margot Schmidt Dias for MEMEUP/CEPS.
were subordinated and silenced by traditional historiography'. (Sanches, 2012). The viewer of ethnographic films was commonly subsumed to the Eurocentric and hegemonic perspective on the distant and ‘exotic’ Africa, which accentuated I/Other dichotomies. As James Clifford asserted ‘ethnographic texts are orchestrations of multi-vocal exchanges occurring in politically charged situations. The subjectivities produced in these often-unequal exchanges are constructed domains of truth, serious fictions.’ (Clifford, 1988, p. 10).

New techniques have surfaced in Anthropology as ways of writing culture. From extensive fieldwork, self-reflexivity, participant observation, to a dialogical aesthetic or ‘speaking nearby’ constitute some of the methods that have been explored, in an attempt to minimise the power relations between the anthropologists and the people subjected to the authority of the anthropological discourse. The concept of ‘speaking nearby’, coined by Trinh Minh-Ha in her film Reassemblage (1982), acknowledges the impossibility of speaking ‘about’ or ‘for’ the ‘other’ in ethnographic representations. Instead she calls for a bringing of the self into play, a self-reflexive model by which ‘the core of representation is the reflexive interval.’ (Minh-Ha, 1991, p.48).

Of course from our present standpoint we cannot look uncritically at the anthropological work and ethnographic films of the Dias. But in order to fully understand the approach to their field of study, whether in Portugal or Mozambique, we can and should comprehend the temporal and geo-political framework in which this work was produced to realise the imbrications between the ethnographic endeavour and the social and political context from within it was made and funded. It is this relation that Ângela Ferreira hints at in her installation.

The fact that Jorge Dias trained as an Ethnologist within the German academia, can therefore not be neglected, insofar that it may have shaped his understanding of popular culture as always under the threat of technological and social transformation and therefore in need of being documented as a way of preservation. This was in fact the attitude towards the Makonde which according to today’s academic understanding fails to acknowledge or study the impact of the cultural dominance of the colonial project. On the other hand, the Anthropologist Catarina Alves Costa, who has also researched extensively on the ethnographic legacies of the Dias team, asserts that Margot Dias’ collaboration with the German Scientific Film Institute of Göttingen (IWF) in the creation of the Encyclopaedia Cinematographica must also be mentioned to understand how the direct influences of German ethnographic filmmaking shaped Margot’s own approach and way of filming. From a theoretical and methodological point of view, the German encyclopaedic ethnography operated on strict principles in close relation to the discipline of classic Ethnology. These sought high scientific quality, faithful reproduction of ‘reality’ and abolished any kind of staging or additions in the editing process and interference

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8 This reflexive interval glosses on Homi Bhabha’s ‘in-between’ space or third space – a place where borders are hybrid thus facilitating the emergence of new identities.
9 Institut für den Wissenschaftlichen Film, based in Göttingen, Germany.
with the filmed subjects (Costa, 2012)\textsuperscript{10}. Indeed, under the claim of speaking about and the pretension of objectivity, Margot Dias effaced herself from the filming process. Had she done the films today, she would have probably included her own commentaries and we would have been able to engage with her own subjectivity.

“How can the blacks, who are really kind to children and sick people, have respect for whites? It really hurts.” (Ferreira, 2015)\textsuperscript{11}.

In A Tendency to Forget, Ângela Ferreira proposes an artistic inquiry through colonial knowledge, archives and the history of scientific museology. The artist does not refrain from delivering a critical view on the regulating and fragmentary nature of the archive while, at the same time, reflecting on the complexity of its images whose aesthetical codes and operability the artist reverses. The need of looking at the past, beyond the official and often not so transparent narrative, full of lacunae, is imperative to gain a different understanding of the present. The installation draws a narrative thread across different stories, links and images and Ferreira invites viewers to reconstruct what the story was or could be and to assemble an ‘alternative’ history from the montage of the different elements. The work thus suggests new ways of looking at the past, so that these can be absorbed in the present in order to imagine a memory for the future that can honestly tell the history of our colonial past, leaving aside any feelings of nostalgia and self-indulgencies. And because the unlearning of the past is still imperative, it is according to the artist still required to engage with post-colonial theory (Ose, 2015).

In a recent conversation with the artist, she mentioned a passage in Margot Dias’ diaries in which the ethnographer reflects on the kind of mistakes the team had made in their fieldwork and how they could have improved them. Indeed projects as A Tendency to Forget are essential, if only for the trajectories the failure they reveal, will open up.

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Bibliography

\textsuperscript{10}Catarina Alves Costa also reminds that it is important to consider that such films or footage are to be understood today as visual records of human activities, unmediated observation of the ‘real’ where the camera is seen as a tool to register and keep data on culture(s). The images are supposed to be complemented with other documents, drawings, photographs and objects.

\textsuperscript{11} Intertitle in A Tendency to Forget (2015) referring to an excerpt of Margot Dias field diaries between 1957-1961.


