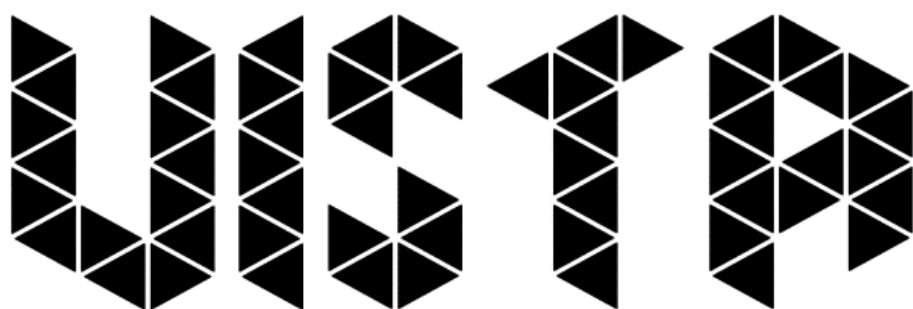




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Forms of Self-Inscription in Contemporary African Cinema: The Case of Mozambican Cinema

As Formas de Autoinscrição nos Cinemas Africanos Contemporâneos: O Caso do Cinema em Moçambique

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FORMS OF SELF-INSCRIPTION IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN CINEMA: THE CASE OF MOZAMBIKAN CINEMA

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how contemporary Mozambican cinema produces counter-hegemonic images of “national representation” and of Mozambique’s recent history in the films of Inadelso Cossa, Lara Sousa, and Yara Costa. It analyses, through the work of these three filmmakers, images that invite a reconsideration of Mozambique in relation to memory, history, and identity. By expanding the notion of Mozambican cinema and including films produced during the colonial war period, this study aims to deepen understanding of how Mozambican cinema revisits, elaborates, and interrogates the legacy, experience, and aesthetics emerging from the years of the Instituto Nacional de Cinema (National Film Institute). The institute’s dissolution in 1991 marked both the conclusion of *revolutionary or liberation cinema* (Andrade-Watkins, 1995) and the end of the State-led model of film production in Mozambique, which subsequently required reconfiguration. Accordingly, this study investigates how contemporary Mozambican cinema inscribes images of the country from positions of displacement, fragmentation, and incompleteness, where memory becomes a contested and creative field, and self-inscription functions as a gesture of epistemic sovereignty. The analysis offers an aesthetic reading of contemporary Mozambican films *Memória em Três Actos* (Memory in Three Acts; 2017), *Fin* (The End; 2017), and *The Crossing* (2014), to understand how these works challenge the legacy of the National Film Institute and the revolutionary project of the Liberation Front of Mozambique. This analysis is inspired by the essay “As Formas Africanas de Auto-Inscrição” (African Forms of Self-Inscription) by philosopher Achille Mbembe (2001).

KEYWORDS

Mozambican cinema, self-inscription, ruins, post-Soviet period

AS FORMAS DE AUTOINSCRIÇÃO NOS CINEMAS AFRICANOS CONTEMPORÂNEOS: O CASO DO CINEMA EM MOÇAMBIQUE

RESUMO

Esse artigo pretende discutir as formas através das quais o cinema moçambicano contemporâneo dá a ver imagens contra-hegemônicas acerca da “representação nacional” ou sobre a história recente de Moçambique nos filmes de Inadelso Cossa, Lara Sousa e Yara Costa. Buscaremos analisar, através da obra desses três realizadores, imagens que nos convoquem a repensar Moçambique em relação à sua memória, história e identidade. Ao expandir a noção do cinema moçambicano e considerar filmes realizados ainda durante a guerra colonial, pretende-se aprofundar a forma como o cinema moçambicano revisita, aprofunda e questiona o legado, a experiência e a estética advindos dos anos do Instituto Nacional de Cinema, cujo fim trágico, em 1991, põe fim ao *cinema revolucionário* ou *de libertação* (Andrade-Watkins, 1995), como também

ao modelo estatal de produção de cinema moçambicano, que teve de ser reinventado a partir daí. Assim, interessa compreender de que modo o cinema moçambicano contemporâneo inscreve imagens do país a partir de um lugar de deslocamento, fragmentação e inacabamento onde a memória se torna campo de disputa e criação e a autoinscrição um gesto de soberania epistêmica. A análise articula uma leitura estética dos filmes contemporâneos moçambicanos *Memória em Três Actos* (2017), *Fin* (Fim; 2017) e *The Crossing* (A Passagem; 2014), buscando compreender como tais obras tensionam o legado do Instituto Nacional de Cinema e do projeto revolucionário da Frente de Libertação de Moçambique. Esse texto é livremente inspirado no ensaio “As Formas Africanas de Auto-Inscrição”, do filósofo Achille Mbembe (2001).

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

cinema moçambicano, autoinscrição, ruínas, tempo pós-soviético

INTRODUCTION

Mozambican cinema, like the national filmographies of other Portuguese-speaking African countries, carries the complex legacy of its emergence, which coincided with national independence. In evoking cinematic tradition, multiple analogies have been drawn to this dual historical event in 1975. Raquel Schefer (2011) draws on a paraphrase of Jean-Luc Godard to summarise this coincidence: the political emergence of the nation would have merged with the appearance of its own cinematic image.

Norte Contra o Sul (North Versus South) or *Nascimento de uma Nação* (Birth of a Nation) would mark only the beginning of a public-television project in Mozambique, led by Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville, and funded by the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO).

In an interview conducted by Sol de Carvalho and Maria Augusta (2022), Godard states that he signed a two-year contract to develop video production in Mozambique and to collaborate on the design of the future national television service. Together with his company, Sonimage, the French filmmaker proposed using video as an audiovisual medium, given its greater accessibility and lower cost. The filmmaker intended to produce a series of five films entitled *Naissance (de l'Image) d'une Nation* (Birth [of the Image] of a Nation) and, in parallel, to develop a study for the establishment of Mozambican television. Godard, among others, considered Mozambique a privileged site for experimenting with a new form of television, particularly because approximately 95% of the population had never had access to audiovisual images. In his reports, he advocated constructing “an image”, “the people”, and “the image of that people”. However, the critical and reflective questions raised by the filmmaker did not correspond to the political priorities of the post-independence period. For this reason, the project was ultimately rejected by the Mozambican government.

It is also widely recognised in mainstream accounts that, alongside Godard, Jean Rouch was involved in the construction of post-independence Mozambican cinema, marking an intense transnational effort in the 1970s which, however, did not originate solely in Europe. In an interview conducted by Ana Cristina Pereira (2022), Gabriel

Mondlane highlights the importance of South–South horizontal relations between countries such as Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Cuba, and Brazil, established in Mozambique in the post-independence period through cinema, thereby challenging the hegemonic emphasis on European presence in the formation of Mozambican cinema. Focusing on the African experience, Mondlane’s account clearly emphasises the centrality of the *Kuxa Kanema* project and the Instituto Nacional de Cinema (INC) in developing a distinct, decolonised perspective and fostering a cinematic culture in Mozambique that challenged European conventions and cinematic norms. Likewise, in Nataniel Ngomane’s (2022) view, there was a process of cultural transformation before independence, exemplified by the significance of film clubs in Lourenço Marques and works such as *Nós Matamos o Cão Tinhoso!* (We Killed Mangy Dog!; Luís Bernardo Honwana, 1964), which underscores both an anti-colonial stance and a significant cultural production before decolonisation.

On the other hand, Andrade-Watkins (1995) emphasises that both Rouch’s and Godard’s interventions were problematic — the former due to an excessively theoretical approach, and the latter due to its detachment from local realities. In contrast to these experiences, the author highlights the central role of Ruy Guerra, whose practice was grounded in concrete projects. Whereas European filmmakers sought to impose their visions on Mozambican cinema and on Mozambique itself, Guerra was able to understand the Mozambican audiovisual environment as external to European modes of thought and translated ideas into practice through documentary, educational, and cinematic initiatives within the INC — an institution which, inspired by the Cuban model of the Instituto Cubano de Arte Cinematográfico, became the principal hub of a politically engaged and economically innovative cinema on the African continent.

This relationship between Mozambican cinema and the processes of independence and decolonisation has, in many accounts and sources, become consolidated as a historical truth. Bamba (2011) argues that the context of decolonisation and resistance to imperialism — also marked by conflict with Rhodesia and apartheid South Africa — created an almost natural pathway for the political use of cinema and for new forms of international cooperation.

Although this understanding is widely accepted, this article proposes a more transnational and complex reading of Mozambican film history. The central hypothesis advanced here is that African cinemas of the post-independence period cannot be treated in the same manner as European or Latin American national cinemas, insofar as the emergence of African nations in the 20th century was simultaneously heterogeneous and continental, and the decolonisation process itself would not have been viable without the support of international forces — such as the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba — nor without the formation of a pan-Africanist anti-colonial coalition. Expanding the historical frame is therefore essential: by incorporating images produced during the colonial war in the 1960s, commissioned by and under the supervision of FRELIMO, we bring into view a cinema that predates formal independence. Andrade-Watkins (1995) notes that filmmakers and activists from countries as diverse as France, Sweden, Yugoslavia, and

Cuba — including the African American lawyer and filmmaker Robert Van Lierop — produced films that narrated the struggle against Portuguese rule. These films were widely screened abroad, generating a significant wave of international solidarity with the liberation cause.

Also during the colonial war, there were some counter-hegemonic cinematic incursions by Portuguese filmmakers, which resulted in important films set in Mozambique, such as *Deixem-Me ao Menos Subir às Palmeiras* (Let Me at Least Climb the Palm Trees; Joaquim Lopes Barbosa, 1972) and *Catembe* (Faria de Almeida, 1965). These films are, in an asymmetrical manner, related to the cultural context that gave rise to guerrilla cinema (Andrade-Watkins, 1995), produced in Mozambique during the 1960s, and to the anti-colonial orientation of the 1950s and 1960s, marked by the political and intellectual leadership of “Lusophone” Africa (Amílcar Cabral, Agostinho Neto, and Eduardo Mondlane), whose influence reverberated throughout the Western context¹.

Still today, much of the analysis and research sources on Mozambican cinema are directed towards the search for images of the immediate post-independence period, a moment in which FRELIMO’s influence was unavoidable and decisive — not only due to the social function attributed to cinema, conceived as a form of decolonisation operating as a frontline of struggle, but also because of the cultural value and significance of the films produced (especially) after 1975, namely that of “inventing” a nation and consolidating the memory of the Mozambican people. Although not assuming an unequivocal consensus, Mozambican cinema is therefore inseparable from two central episodes in the country’s history: the liberation war (1964–1974) and the revolution (1975–1987), having been strongly shaped by FRELIMO’s political-cultural project (Schefer, 2017).

Raquel Schefer (2017) proposes a periodisation of Mozambican cinema organised into three main phases: a pre-independence moment between 1966 and 1974/1975; the so-called “aesthetic of liberation”, linked to the INC between 1975/1976 and 1984, a phase further subdivided into a period of institution and a period of destitution of cinematic language; and finally, “socialist realism”, situated between 1984/1985 and 1987.

In this article, we choose not to adopt the notion of “pre-cinema” in relation to Mozambican cinema produced before independence, and instead proceed from the assumption that the cinematic experiences emerging from the liberation war in Mozambique fostered a profound cinematic practice that later germinated in the creation of the INC. Our argument is that the Marxist revolutionary thought disseminated through Soviet support during the colonial war, and socialism as the political model adopted in the post-independence period, operate as a kind of ideological amalgam of Mozambican cinema, establishing a *continuum* between transnational guerrilla cinema of the 1960s and the State cinema produced by the INC from 1976 onwards; for this reason, we reject the notion of a “pre-cinema” that is assumed to have existed before independence, as suggested by Schefer (2017).

¹ In “Cinemas em Português: Estratégias Para Entrar e Sair da Lusofonia” (Cinema in Portuguese: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Lusophony; Sales, 2017), the problems related to conceptualising “Lusophony” are discussed in greater depth, as well as the reasons for consistently placing the term in inverted commas.

Nevertheless, Schefer's (2017) chronology proves highly productive in highlighting two fundamental moments: before and after the creation of the INC and, consequently, before and after the socialist experience. This division points to a transformation that accompanies the cultural dynamics of the late 20th century, as the economic and political opening of countries such as Mozambique generated wide-ranging consequences at the cultural level and beyond. We therefore propose to consider 21st-century Mozambican cinema as an inscription within what Susan Buck-Morss (2008) terms "post-Soviet condition" — an intermediary temporality in which the shortcomings of modernity are already acknowledged, yet dependence upon it remains too strong to be overcome. To engage with films produced in the 21st century by Mozambican filmmakers, it is essential to address these historical frameworks and their aesthetic and political ramifications, both in terms of formal choices and in relation to the conditions of production, distribution, and exhibition of cinema in Mozambique.

Beyond these two historical milestones, international collaboration is a decisive aspect that appears to counterbalance the symbiotic relationship between cinema and the birth of the nation. Even before independence, this cooperation was decisive. França (2014) notes that the first film from independent Mozambique was a work by the Yugoslav filmmaker Dragutin Popovic, who documented FRELIMO's President Samora Machel's journey from the north to the south of the country. Soranz (2014) further complements this account by highlighting that FRELIMO invited filmmakers from Cuba, Europe, and the United States to document the revolution. Among the outcomes of this effort are the documentary *Venceremos* (We Will Win; 1965), by the Yugoslav Dragutin Popovic, filmed clandestinely on the battlefronts, and *A Luta Continua* (The Struggle Continues; 1971), by the American Robert Van Lierop.

From this point onward, the cinematic experience in Mozambique was marked by a duality between the national and the transnational, as well as by FRELIMO's aesthetic and political choices, culminating in the creation of the INC in 1975. The institution became an important centre for the production of newsreels, documentaries, and feature films, its most widely recognised project being the newsreel *Kuxa Kanema* — an expression meaning "the birth of cinema" — considered by critics and film historians of African cinema to be the most successful initiative in creating a cinema oriented towards the interests of the African people (Arenas, 2012, as cited in França, 2014).

Andrade-Watkins (1995) examines the INC's central role in depth. The author highlights both the institution's experimental phase, marked by figures such as Ruy Guerra, Jean Rouch, and Jean-Luc Godard, and its later phase, oriented towards educating and informing the population through the newsreel *Kuxa Kanema*. Conceived in 1981, the project was designed to meet the information needs of the population and served as the first step in the technical training of the institute's professionals. Before its decline and definitive closure in 1990, *Kuxa Kanema* produced 395 weekly editions and dozens of short and feature-length documentaries (Andrade-Watkins, 1995).

The significance of *Kuxa Kanema* persists today in the imaginary of contemporary Mozambican cinema, whether through the centrality of documentary as a privileged

genre or through the thematic choices of films. However, a more detailed aesthetic investigation into the impact of socialism on post-independence cinema still requires further scholarly attention.

The State model of liberation cinema developed in Mozambique in the post-independence period managed to overcome the post-colonial infrastructural difficulties that Francophone African cinema — of considerable importance within the continental cinematic context — was not able to address in the same way. Andrade-Watkins (1995) argues that Mozambique invested in the fusion of ideology, form, content, and context, becoming a pioneer in a Marxist-oriented cinematic model that articulated political engagement and film production. Furthermore, the nationalisation of the film industry enabled the creation and maintenance of production, distribution, and exhibition structures under a government that regarded cinema as a vital force for post-colonial development and education.

The end of the INC in Mozambique, resulting both from the death of Samora Machel in 1986 and the consequent transition from socialism to a market economy, as well as from the fire that affected its facilities in 1991, led to the profound dismantling and transformation of the State model of film production, creating a vacuum in public film policy that has persisted ever since. This void, although not entirely filled, was occupied by a market economy that created space for more sporadic and ad hoc cultural funding through co-productions with foreign entities, embassies, and non-governmental organisations. Moreover, after Samora Machel's death, cinema ceased to be a political priority. The decline of the INC intensified until the 1991 fire, which destroyed much of its facilities, equipment, and film archives. Despite this, Mozambican cinema did not disappear. New production companies and associations emerged in the 1990s, such as Coopimagem, Ébano Multimédia, Promarte, and the Mozambican Association of Filmmakers, which helped sustain audiovisual production in the country.

Concerning the transnational character of cinema in Mozambique, this article seeks to question the hegemonic post-independence narrative sedimented by FRELIMO and to identify images that challenge official narratives in the post-socialist period. One of its hypotheses is that, once the State model of film production was interrupted with the end of the INC, there was also an aesthetic transition in Mozambican cinema that accompanied the emergence of a new cycle of film production in the 21st century. Given that film production had been centralised within the INC, and that its themes, narratives, and approaches were governed by FRELIMO, the end of this production cycle also brought about aesthetic transformations. We argue that this shift relates to the emergence, in the 21st century, of a contemporary cinema increasingly centred on personal and fragmented narratives, as well as on forms of expression that are detached from the hegemonic “national” framework.

In light of this transition, marked by the end of the INC, several questions arise: how should we address the legacy and closure of the INC, and what significance does it have in Mozambique? In what ways does 21st-century Mozambican cinema revisit this mode of filmmaking and its cultural importance for the country's history and memory?

Is it possible to identify counter-hegemonic images in relation to the official narratives produced by FRELIMO? Are contemporary Mozambican filmmakers still engaged with questions of national memory, identity, and colonial legacy? In what ways is the official narrative questioned in the post-socialist period? What consequences of this period continue to reverberate in 21st-century Mozambican cinema?

Rather than attempting to answer these questions — despite their relevance — it is productive to consider that contemporary Mozambican cinema (and, in a broader sense, post-colonial/post-Soviet cinema) emerges in a context in which former subjects of representation — now authors of their own narratives — turn, in the 21st century, towards the ruins of this project. In engaging with utopia and catastrophe, they construct other narratives of the future. Returning to Buck-Morss (2008),

again, to be clear, post-Soviet does not imply a universal global culture, but rather a universal historical condition, one that does and should call for an infinite variety and democratic interaction of response. It is the condition, the historical moment, that is shared. A political definition of the elusive newness of globalisation, is suggested here, as well as the bare bones, the thin definition, of a new collective subjectivity: We, the “we” who have nothing more — nor less — in common than sharing this time: this is the universal condition to which I refer. (p. 30)

ON THE USE OF THE TERM “POST-INDEPENDENCE” RATHER THAN POST-COLONIAL

The choice of the term “post-independence” — rather than “post-colonial” — is not merely semantic, but methodological. As Felwine Sarr (2016/2019) explains, African independence does not mark the end of colonial processes, but rather inaugurates a time of elaborating futures. In this sense, Mozambican post-independence becomes a space of symbolic struggle over the image: between the persistence of colonial structures and the desire to imagine new ways of being and existing. For Sarr, Afrotopia refers to self-inscription in African historical time and the creation of a utopian space of one’s own — an as-yet non-existent place in which the triple gesture of remembering, asserting oneself in the here and now, and imagining a future deemed impossible by colonialism can construct new forms of existence.

Manthia Diawara (2000) proposes understanding African cinema as a practice of self-inscription, a gesture through which filmmakers narrate themselves and their communities in dialogue with oral traditions and collective memories. By adopting strategies of subjectivation — first-person voice, the use of family archives, and the re-enactment of memories — contemporary Mozambican cinema reconfigures the revolutionary gesture of the 1970s, shifting it from armed struggle to narrative struggle. “Self-inscription” is also a concept articulated by Mbembe (2001) to describe how Africans write their own conditions of existence, resisting the colonial logic of representation. This writing from ruins — of the colonial past and socialist utopias — constructs, through fragments, a

new aesthetics of life. It is within this framework that the films of Lara Sousa, Inadelso Cossa, and Yara Costa can be read as a gesture of recomposition of memory.

In this sense, self-inscription defines not only a visual counter-construction emerging within Mozambican cinema, but also an ontological practice characterising anti-colonial struggle. By self-inscription, reference is made not only to a set of images, but to a mode of being in the world, an emergent subjectivity, as Mbembe (2001) suggests, or a new human being and a new world arising at the margins of Western modernity.

Accordingly, the term “post-independence” is preferred over “post-colonial” for two reasons. The first lies in the fact that “post-independence” designates a precise moment immediately following colonisation, referring to the period in which Mozambique comes into existence not only in juridical and official terms, but also in which concerns over national unity and the future projects of emergent subjectivities come to require a significant cultural effort, in which cinema plays a central role. In the context of “Lusophone” Africa (and perhaps across the wider African continent), relations of power inherited from the colonial period persist and are reproduced through institutional forms of cultural hegemony and linguistic domination. However, the use of the term “post-independence” does not overlook the importance of the discussion on postcolonial time and space, for, as Stuart Hall (2003) argues, the postcolonial

is precisely this “double inscription” — which breaks with the clear demarcations separating inside/outside the colonial system, upon which histories of imperialism have long flourished — that the concept of “post-colonial” brings into view. Consequently, the term “post-colonial” is not restricted to describing a society or an epoch. It rereads “colonisation” as part of a global process that is essentially transnational and transcultural — and produces a decentred, diasporic or “global” rewriting of the grand imperial narratives of the past, centred on the nation. Its theoretical value, therefore, lies precisely in its refusal of a perspective of “here” and “there”, of a “then” and “now”, of a “home” and “abroad”. (p. 109)

The second reason relates to the fact that, having unpacked the term “postcolonial” in other texts, it serves as a starting point, in this analysis, the premise that what matters regarding the postcolonial time/space is to affirm it as a moment of contested narratives and a time in which Europe and Africa are deeply entangled, as Hall argues in the quote above, blurring “national” boundaries.

POST-SOCIALISM AND THE FRACTURING OF IMAGES OF THE NATION

One of the hypotheses guiding the analysis of contemporary Mozambican cinema is that cinema had already become part of the lived experience of urban audiences — albeit a minority audience — and that, both before and after independence, it was permeated by foreign influences deriving not only from the colonial legacy and Europe, but also — and perhaps above all — from the socialist East. Provisionally, and in a way that calls for more detailed analysis, these influences point to a transnational condition of cinema

in Mozambique that developed independently of FRELIMO's political and cultural project, while also underscoring the significance of filmmaking in the country within the broader context of the former Portuguese colonies in Africa as a successful experience of revolutionary cinema.

Andrade-Watkins (1995) notes that, in the decade preceding independence — 1974 in Guinea-Bissau and 1975 in the remaining colonies — film production was driven by two converging forces: on the one hand, a newly awakened internal sense of unity and collaboration among the colonies; on the other, external support from the international community for the revolutionary efforts of liberation movements, including FRELIMO in Mozambique, the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola in Angola, and the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cabo Verde in Guinea and Cabo Verde.

What followed in the 1990s marked the collapse of socialism in Mozambique and the country's neoliberal restructuring. The dismantling of the INC, the privatisation of the media, and the weakening of cultural policies profoundly transformed the audiovisual field. This moment, which Andrade-Watkins (1995) describes as "post-socialist", opened up an ambiguous space: on the one hand, cinema ceased to function as the voice of the revolution; on the other, a new generation emerged that critically revisited the traces of the socialist utopia.

This post-socialist cinephile generation became known through the films of Sol de Carvalho and Licínio Azevedo, among others. Their films anticipate issues we seek to explore further in the contemporary films of the 21st century: the ability to bring unfinished memories and the spectres of the past to the surface in the form of ruins and the dead haunting the present.

It is within this context that the works of Inadelso Cossa, Lara Sousa, and Yara Costa emerge — a generation that shifts attention away from the collective revolutionary epic towards the intimate, traumatic, and fragmented experience of the post-Soviet period. Concerning the films of these filmmakers, the hypothesis advanced here is that Mozambican cinema underwent a narrative transformation from the grand narratives of State cinema — linked to the very "invention" of a national cinema in the 1970s — to a micropolitics of memory, also resulting from the absence of public policies and from the symbolic and identitarian dispersal brought about by the end of socialism. This transformation was already perceptible in the transition from the 1990s to the 21st century in the films of Sol de Carvalho and Licínio Azevedo. What this article seeks to emphasise, however, is that the micronarratives found in the films of Cossa, Sousa, and Costa are increasingly personal and intimate and, for that very reason, increasingly disaggregated, no longer corresponding to the notion of a "national" cinema that the previous generation still sought to consolidate.

Returning to Susan Buck-Morss's (2008) thought, contemporary Mozambican cinema, in engaging with the ruins of socialism and the failures of revolutionary cinema, appears to resonate with her reflections on post-Soviet time. For the author, however, present nostalgia for the grand gestures of collective heroism may remain, the revolutionary ideal is irredeemably associated with a history of violence, terror, and a culture of warfare that marginalised women, children, and, more broadly, all forms of life — making its disappearance not only inevitable but necessary.

Films such as *Memória em Três Actos* (Memory in Three Acts; Inadelso Cossa, 2017), *Fin* (The End; Lara Sousa, 2017), and *The Crossing* (Yara Costa, 2014) articulate the personal and the political, trauma and history. These cinematic practices abandon the ambition to “represent Mozambique” and instead challenge the very concept of representation through their investment in fragmented, personal narratives. Inspired by an ethics of listening and by the recovery of silenced voices, these works function as audiovisual practices of self-inscription, shifting attention from the nation to the individual.

Stuart Hall (2003) reminds us that the post-colonial is, above all, a moment of narrative contestation and identity rearticulation. In the Mozambican case, post-socialism deepens this contestation by calling into question the place of individual memory and the State’s role in the production of forgetting.

What is seldom discussed within the dominant strand of scholarship on Mozambican cinema and its relationship with the State, FRELIMO, and the construction of Mozambique is the extent to which official post-independence narratives obscure a significant number of voices and oral perspectives that challenge FRELIMO’s official version of events and how “national memory” has been invoked and constructed.

In *Memória em Três Actos*, Inadelso Cossa constructs his narrative through a double gesture: he draws on archival material while simultaneously lending his own voice to the film, explicitly assuming the moral obligation of investigating a period he did not experience. There is here a productive tension between generational distance and identitarian proximity — he was not present during these events, yet he carries them as an inheritance.

The narrative backbone is structured around three figures whose testimonies on Portuguese colonialism are woven throughout the film. To organise them, Cossa adopts a structure that evokes the architecture of a memoir: a prologue that opens, three acts that develop the narrative, and an epilogue that closes it — while leaving it open. Each act follows a similar internal logic: an introduction of the interlocutor and their trajectory, the recording of their experiences, and a final reorientation that, rather than concluding, suggests continuity — as if the documentary itself acknowledged that memory cannot be exhausted in a single act of listening.

The prologue begins with an image that is at once historical and symbolic: the lowering of the Portuguese flag during the independence ceremony on June 25, 1975. From there, the editing operates through contrast — children marching, crowds celebrating a promised future, and, in counterpoint, the ostentatious display of Portuguese upper-class settlers. Independence thus appears as a tension-laden dream: the utopia of the new country existed alongside the deep marks left by the repression of the International and State Defence Police (PIDE), which the filmmaker identifies as the origin of an institutional and educational void inherited by Mozambique.

The three acts — “O Fantasma Colonial” (The Colonial Ghost), “As Memórias da Violência” (Memories of Violence), and “Entre as Ruínas da Memória” (Among the Ruins of Memory) — function as layers that overlap rather than succeed one another. The atmosphere of remembrance is constant, and the moments of testimony by the three characters intersect, creating a texture of collective memory composed of individual voices.

What distinguishes Cossa’s position from conventional documentary practice is that he does not observe from the outside. By narrating himself as a Mozambican

investigating his country's resistance to colonial oppression, the filmmaker incorporates the act of filmmaking into the film's subject matter, in a gesture of *self-inscription*. His familiarity with these issues is not only biographical but also epistemic: he does not approach Mozambican memory from the outside; he belongs to it, and the film is simultaneously an act of inquiry and a recognition of that belonging.

Cossa shifts away from conventional narratives of national heroism to engage with the intimate and invisible layers of memory. The "act" here is not only part of a narrative structure but also a gesture of remembrance, as each act invokes a distinct dimension of experience: the body, the landscape, and trauma.

The film articulates testimonies, archival footage, and ruined spaces as fragments of a country attempting to recognise itself amid its own symbolic disintegration. Is it possible to argue that Cossa's aesthetics engages in dialogue with Mozambican revolutionary cinema (such as the works of the INC in the 1970s)? This hypothesis will be explored further in future work. What is foregrounded here, however, is how contemporary Mozambican cinema has transformed "national" narratives by adopting a more personal, essayistic, and subjective perspective. In this sense, *Memória em Três Actos* may represent a decolonial turn in Mozambican cinema: rather than reaffirming a homogeneous national project, the film exposes its fissures and contradictions. Cossa works with sound as memory — echoing voices, persistent noise, and heavy silences — and with time as a living material, non-chronological but sensory and affective. The film thus proposes a cinema of listening and restitution — a cinema that interrogates history not through what it shows, but through what remains invisible.

While, in *Memória em Três Actos*, Inadelso Cossa develops a tripartite structure as a kind of ritual passage from collective memory to intimate memory, in which the director seeks to reconstruct the images and sounds of a nation in crisis of identity, in *Fin*, Lara Sousa invokes loss and forgetting, constructed through the director's relationship with her father, Camilo de Sousa, also a filmmaker and a member of FRELIMO.

Camilo de Sousa is one of the central figures of Mozambican cinematography, formed during the INC generation, and his work is essential for understanding the formation of post-independence Mozambican cinema and the political-cultural project of FRELIMO after 1975. His work spans different historical moments in the country: the revolutionary enthusiasm of independence, the civil war, the crisis of the socialist project, and the transformation of Mozambican audiovisual production in subsequent decades.

Returning to the unfinished work of the father through an incomplete biographical film reveals how the generation of Mozambican filmmakers has sought to address the historical discontinuities experienced in Mozambique: the end of colonialism and its consequences; the end of socialism and its consequences. In her short film *Fin*, Lara Sousa also sets out to reconstruct part of this memory, but by choosing essay film form. *Fin* is a kind of letter, not addressed solely to the father and his revolutionary cinema, but also to herself and to the very act of filming.

Sousa's essay film is marked by an aesthetic of intimacy and incompleteness. Visually, it engages with wooden walkways and maritime horizons, empty interiors, landscapes between Cuba and Mozambique, and archival images related to the filmmaker's father. In *Fin*, the gesture of filming is also a gesture of attempted reconciliation between

past and present, as well as an act of *self-inscription* — a cinema that looks inward while incisively exposing the fragility of official narratives surrounding the post-war period and failed utopias.

An important aspect in the formation and consolidation of the generation of Mozambican cinema analysed here through the works of Inadelso Cossa, Lara Sousa, and Yara Costa is the creation and significance of the Dockanema Festival. It is no coincidence that the three works discussed in this section on self-inscription in Mozambican cinema are documentary films.

Dockanema played a fundamental role in the aesthetic, intellectual, and political formation of Lara Sousa and in the development of contemporary documentary cinema in Mozambique. Established in Maputo in 2006, the festival emerged at a moment of structural fragility in Mozambican audiovisual production, marked by the consequences of the civil war, the disappearance of the INC, and the scarcity of spaces for film training and circulation. In this context, Dockanema became much more than a film festival: it functioned as a space for encounter, critical reflection, and the construction of international networks for a new generation of African filmmakers.

Lara Sousa's participation as a programmer at the festival was decisive in consolidating her cinematic gaze. Continuous engagement with African, Latin American, and experimental cinemas enabled her to develop a sensibility oriented towards essayistic, autobiographical, and hybrid forms of filmmaking. In our analysis, this experience contributed to the filmmaker's departure from both televisual models and traditional forms of ethnographic documentary, often associated with the exoticising representation of Africa in Western media.

Beyond this, the festival also played a central role in the aesthetic decolonisation of Mozambican cinema. By presenting African films as spaces of critical thought, formal experimentation, and the articulation of subjective memory, Dockanema helped to displace African cinema from a peripheral or merely anthropological position. This perspective became essential in Sousa's work, whose films reject folklorised images of Africa and privilege themes such as memory, displacement, intimacy, archive, and post-colonialism. In films by Lara Sousa such as *Fin* and *Kalunga* (2019), the influence of this intellectual and artistic environment is clearly evident, shaped by debates on African self-representation, archival politics, and Afro-Atlantic diaspora.

Yara Costa is a Mozambican journalist and filmmaker whose trajectory between Mozambique, Angola, South Africa, Brazil, the United States, and Cuba has profoundly shaped her artistic and political outlook. After working as a reporter in Brazil, she turned to filmmaking, driven by the desire to make visible narratives often absent from international media circuits and to challenge the stereotypical representations that continue to shape images of the African continent in Western media.

Her transnational trajectory has contributed to the construction of a cinematic gaze marked by displacement, circulation, and intercultural encounter. Her films reflect precisely this condition of transit: they explore geographical, identitarian, and symbolic limits, making borders — physical, historical, and affective — a central element of her cinematic language.

Regarding *The Crossing*, Costa proposes a cinema of crossing and diaspora, expanding the Mozambican gaze beyond the Indian Ocean and beyond historical and

contemporary flows between Mozambique, India, and the Arab world. The film follows a trajectory that begins on Mozambique Island, a departure point for slave ships bound for Haiti, where an African descendant maintains a cultural identity that, paradoxically, has been lost among many of those who remained in Africa. *The Crossing* emerges from a reflection on the historically tense relationship between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. While one country strongly recognises and values its African heritage, the other tends to reject or silence this dimension of its historical and cultural identity.

The director constructs a hybrid narrative, situated between documentary and poetic essay, in which the sea becomes a metaphor for the circulation of people, ideas, and colonial memories. In contrast to Sousa's introspective gaze or Cossa's archaeological approach, Yara Costa adopts a transnational and feminist perspective that repositions Mozambique within a global geography of memory. Her aesthetics oscillate between the real and the oneiric, offering a sensorial and fluid reading of the historical connections that have shaped the country.

Above all, *Memória em Três Actos* and *Fin* are films that engage directly with the ruins of time and with the possibility of rendering visible that which remains invisible among the remnants of memory. It is important to note that both Mbembe (2001) and Buck-Morss (2008) think through the notion of ruins — Mbembe through the colonial and post-colonial ruins of Africa, and Buck-Morss through the ruins of socialism and modernity. Both conceive of the image as a space for the critical and affective recomposition of the world, and it is in this sense that we advance the hypothesis that, in contemporary Mozambican cinema, the ruin functions as both symbolic recomposition and as a landscape through which to think past, present, and future.

These films configure a cinema of self-inscription, in which the gesture of filming is also a gesture of thinking — thinking the country, the body, time, and the very act of seeing and existing.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The central aim of this article has been to revisit the historiography of Mozambican cinema to understand how self-inscription may be grasped as an aesthetic gesture, whether through autobiographical or counter-visual choices made by the filmmakers discussed here, or as a broader reconfiguration of the narrative space of contemporary cinema in Mozambique, conceptualising self-inscription as a complex effort towards epistemic sovereignty (Sarr, 2016/2019).

Contemporary Mozambican cinema reopens the debate on the role of images in the formation of national memory. By shifting away from guerrilla cinema or from the imperative of constructing the “national”, Mozambican cinema — as is the case with much African cinema in the 21st century — moves towards critical self-representation, questioning “national” memories, identities, and images. The experience of contemporary African cinemas appears to reveal an essentially transnational character, itself a reflection of the heterogeneous, uneven, and fragmented processes of decolonisation and the socialist period. We also suggest that the films analysed here produce counter-hegemonic images capable of challenging singular narratives and of fostering a dialogue with the multiplicities of Mozambican experience.

A brief comparison between *Memória em Três Actos* (Inadelso Cossa), *Fin* (Lara Sousa), and *The Crossing* (Yara Costa) allows us to understand how 21st-century Mozambican cinema constitutes a space of self-inscription and reinvention of “national memory”, shifting from the collective and revolutionary project of the 1970s towards more intimate, subjective, and fragmentary ways of narrating the country.

In this sense, whereas post-independence revolutionary cinema in Mozambique was oriented towards the construction of a collective image of the nation, contemporary cinema produced in Mozambique gradually moves towards an aesthetics of fragmentation, interrupted memory, and post-colonial subjectivity. During the first years after 1975, cinema associated with the INC and FRELIMO projects sought to consolidate an idea of national unity, representing the people as a homogeneous subject of revolution. The camera participated in the political pedagogy of the new State, filming collective labour, literacy campaigns, popular mobilisation, and the construction of the so-called “new man”. In this context, the cinematic image functioned as an instrument for the symbolic and territorial integration of a country emerging from Portuguese colonialism.

However, the following decades produced profound fractures in this revolutionary imaginary. The civil war, economic crisis, the collapse of socialist experiments in the international context, and the progressive insertion of Mozambique into neoliberal dynamics radically altered the relationship between cinema, memory, and politics. It is precisely within this context that a new generation of Mozambican filmmakers emerges, for whom the idea of the “nation” no longer appears as a stable totality, but rather as a space marked by ruins, silences, and historical displacements.

Susan Buck-Morss’s (2008) notion of “post-Soviet condition” is particularly relevant for understanding this transformation. The author analyses how the collapse of the major utopian projects of the 20th century produced a global landscape of ideological ruins and suspended temporalities. In the Mozambican case, the dissolution of the socialist horizon did not merely entail an economic or geopolitical shift, but also a profound crisis of historical imagination. Revolutionary promises of collective emancipation coexisted with experiences of disenchantment, precarity, and loss. Contemporary Mozambican cinema emerges precisely from the need to work through these ruins.

For this reason, rather than adopting the linear and teleological narratives of revolutionary cinema, many contemporary filmmakers embrace fragmentary, essayistic, and hybrid structures. In the films of Lara Sousa, for instance, memory appears as lacunar, incomplete, and affectively unstable. The archive ceases to function as transparent evidence of national history and instead emerges as a spectral trace of a past that can no longer be fully recovered. Cinema thus becomes a space for listening to the silences left by independence, war, and the unfulfilled promises of revolutionary modernity.

This shift also entails a transformation of the very notion of the political subject. Whereas revolutionary cinema privileged the collective as the central figure of history, contemporary cinema frequently turns to intimate, familial, and diasporic experiences. Politics shifts from the monumentality of revolution towards affects, trauma, and individual memory. The domestic space, the body, absence, and intergenerational relations become privileged sites for thinking through the historical consequences of colonialism and post-socialism.

Furthermore, the formal fragmentation present in this cinema should not be understood as a purely aesthetic device, but rather as the expression of a specific historical condition. The impossibility of constructing totalising narratives reflects the experience of societies traversed by colonial ruptures, war, migration, and abrupt economic transformations. Contemporary Mozambican cinema recognises that the nation can no longer be represented as a coherent unity; it now appears as a field of tensions, conflicting memories, and overlapping temporalities.

In this sense, contemporary cinema in Mozambique enacts a significant shift: from the revolutionary utopia of national unity to a politics of fragmentary memory. It is a cinema that no longer seeks to affirm historical certainties, but rather to critically inhabit the remnants, ambiguities, and ruins left by the decline of the 20th century's emancipatory projects.

Among the questions that remain open are the following: can cinema ultimately assume a form of “Afrotopia” (Sarr, 2016/2019), one that imagines the future through incompleteness? In what ways do contemporary Mozambican cinemas not only interrogate the past, but also reposition the African gaze within the global present? While these questions require further investigation, it may be suggested that the gesture of contemporary Mozambican cinema consists precisely in transforming the ruins of the past into matter for future imagination — a “Afrotopia” constructed through listening and recomposition.

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