



## Posto avançado do progresso

### An Outpost of Progress

Hugo Vieira da Silva

**Producer** Paulo Branco. **Production companies** Alfama Films (Lisbon, Portugal), Leopardo Filmes (Lisbon, Portugal), República Filmes (Lisbon, Portugal). **Written and directed by** Hugo Vieira da Silva. **Director of photography** Fernando Lockett. **Editor** Paulo Mil Homens. **Sound** Pierre Tucac. **Art director** Isabel Branco. **Costumes** Tânia Franco.

**With** Nuno Lopes (João de Mattos), Ivo Alexandre (Sant'Anna), David Caracol (Makola), Inês Helena (Senhora Makola), António Mpinda (Gobila), José Manuel Mendes (Silva Porto), Cleonise Malulo (Kimpa Vita), Domingos Sita (Bassolongo 1), Miguel Delfina (Pagé) (Bassolongo 2).

DCP, colour. 121 min. Portuguese.

**Premiere** 12 February 2016, Berlinale Forum

**World sales** Alfama Films

Two Portuguese colonial officials reach a remote ivory-trading post on the Congo. Their brilliant white uniforms mark them as foreign bodies in the jungle and as 'mundele' – ghosts in the eyes of the natives. They are supposed to get trade flowing again following the death of the former station chief. Yet the hired workers make little effort to procure new reserves. While the carefree Sant'Anna seeks amusement in alcohol, music and the natives, his superior João de Mattos is soon struck down by malaria, and the waiting and isolation in the jungle gradually fan the flames of mistrust and delusion.

Hugo Vieira da Silva's adaptation of the titular Joseph Conrad story is a multilayered exercise in mimicry in which the ghosts of colonial history take on manifold bodies and garbs to haunt the setting. Its idiosyncratic direction not only makes use of sophisticated visual effects and fascinating images but also borrows from the silent-film aesthetic. In the end, there is no escape for Sant'Anna and João de Mattos – we all know history repeats itself as farce.

*Hanna Keller*

## Colonialism and the history of physicality

I have wished to make a film in Angola for a long time. As a young man, my idea of Africa shifted between vague images of what I had never seen and sparse family memories coloured by the omnipresence of colonial mythologies so common in Portugal. For a long time, I have had the suspicion that these vague memories hide something fundamental. Africa is a phantasm that still haunts my generation, the one born after the independence of the colonies. I accidentally crossed paths with Joseph Conrad's short story 'An Outpost of Progress', a powerful piece about colonialism, about issues of otherness and the ambiguous relationship between coloniser and colonised.

I intended to transpose the short story to the Portuguese colonial context, which has an ancient connection with the Congo and to explore the Portuguese presence in Africa, sketching and mapping a possible system of symptoms of Portuguese colonialism in the late nineteenth century.

Even though slavery had already existed in Africa before the arrival of Portuguese people in the fifteenth century, it is important to remember that the Congo was the starting place of the exploitation of Africans as a commodity, an idea supported through the centuries by Portuguese traders, who, by starting the slave trade in the Atlantic, established the definitive foundations of truly globalised liberal capitalism.

The film is centred around the historical moment of transition, at the end of the nineteenth century, from slavery to the logic of capitalist control of the Africans through a process of libertarian illusion: the literally captive bodies of slaves will slowly give birth to a new body, imprisoned by the consumerism of the twentieth century.

### Peripheral Portuguese people

Conrad's short story is an extremely strong kaleidoscope that depicts the complexity of the colonial relationship, relativising the points of view and positions of the characters, emphasising the power relations, transfers and inter-dependencies among them. The fundamental issue in my version is the illusion of communion of cultures and the impossibilities of translation. I emphasised the idea of reasons colliding, of the deaf-dialogue that repeats itself throughout the centuries between Angolans and Portuguese. I wanted to think of the old Portuguese traders of the nineteenth century, vaguely civilisers, vaguely in line with the European currents of the time, and also with the weight of 400 years of colonisation, infected by the powerful mythologies of a very old country, of small trade and poverty. Peripheral Portuguese people, not very cosmopolitan, ancient and modern all at once.

Looking at them, male bodies, austere, desiring, distressed, but also extraordinarily adaptive and flexible, oblivious palimpsests of 400 years of history. Colonialists one day, the next day claiming not to be that, in a sort of schizophrenia that can only be rooted in a process of deep repression and denial, they are the antecedents of our bodies, of my body, because I am fascinated by the extraordinary possibility of a 'history of physicality of bodies and gestures', as imagined by Aby Warburg [1866–1929, German art historian and cultural theorist, -ed.].

Hugo Vieira da Silva

## In the contact zone of history

Two representatives of the Portuguese trading company take a position on the Congo River. They kill time, explore their surroundings only hesitantly and wait for the desired commodity, ivory, to be brought.

Hugo Vieira da Silva took 'An Outpost of Progress', Joseph Conrad's short story from 1898, as the model for his most recent film, which examines the outpost as a colonial contact zone.

The contact zone emerges as a space of encounters and confrontation between the new arrivals and the local inhabitants. Although hardly larger than a bit of forest, a clearing, and a pier on the river, it is completely contaminated by the global power constellation of the time around 1900.

Vieira da Silva shoots a parodic, in part fantastically historicising costume film; he draws the main characters as figures who hardly know what has brought them here. In a mixture of jungle fever and megalomania, they gradually come to think they are emissaries of progress; but they are sickly drunks who distance themselves from abuse of power, making them perilously blind to their participation in it. There is no right life in the wrong one...

The result is a film with shifting camera perspectives that surveys the mutual perception in the contact zone: the relations between the two company representatives and the bookkeeper Makola, porters recruited from another region, the local population that is never visible, and a troop of men coming from the coast who present themselves imposingly.

This measuring takes up only a small part of the narration, which makes it all the more conspicuous in the plot. João de Mattos (also called 'Boss') paces off the clearing to find the right spot for the flagpole; Sant'Anna (the funny fat man) picks up one of the post's porters to estimate his weight; later the ivory is also weighed.

### Measuring techniques

The film connects the measuring of the space with the measuring of the Africans, who become trade goods. The concrete corporeality and purely material presence of the persons is the precondition for this. The bodies, not thoughts, transport the ideology. Except that the white man's body is protected by the myth of immortality. *Mundele*, the white ghosts, do not die. And so the two whites first engage in a kind of self-discovery. They go swimming as if they had never before been in contact with water; they dance; they touch everything; they hallucinate.

Schnapps (called 'water of life' in Portuguese) and attacks of fever intoxicate the two. Their inebriation shifts the film to a meta-level; from now on, the usual images of expeditions meet counter-images. Mists appear in which spectres of the past materialise and the two see ghosts. In such states, Sant'Anna manages to speak with the porters; he breaks out in incomprehensible babbling and chortled giggles, while de Mattos loses himself in the contemplation of botanic details. *Posto avançado do progresso* stages this intensification of perception in images that recall soft-focus silent movie aesthetics (with insert titles and fades), hand-coloured ethnographic photographs, ornamentalising illustrations in old botanic folios or zoological films that observe birds. Except that here the birds' squawking is translated in subtitles and the men sit at a table not to type reports, but to hold drinking bouts.

The apparatus and technologies that colonialism spread across the globe – the steamship, the gramophone, book and newspaper



printing – encounter techniques of communication that are no less effective, like the ability to speak with figures from the past, or to see things in another light / with another gender / in another body or to give oneself and things different names.

Names play a significant role in the contact zone. They say something about who designates whom from what position, who someone wants to be or whom others take him to be; they create a space of meaning, with which *Posto avançado do progresso* openly plays. Makola calls himself Don Sebastião or Donbaxe, only occasionally responding to the name Makola; and it is said that he comes from Guinea. We never learn his wife's name; she wants to be called Donna Joanna d'Austria (Johanna of Spain) – another Joana, like Joanna Gomez, the leading character in *La Noire de ...* (1966) by Ousmane Sembène.

### Playing with names

Sant'Anna – whose name could be spelled Santana (like the rock musician) or San Tana (holy water) – has hallucinations. He sees apparitions. After the comic book artist Don Marquez, who wants to lead him to Timbuktu (the legendary place described in 1934 in Marcel Griaule and Michel Leiris' *L'Afrique fantôme*), a whole gallery of Congolese and Portuguese rulers of the 16th century appears: Afonso I from Congo, with the name Mvemba a Nzinga, who takes him for the seafarer João Afonso de Aveiro and asks him to seek the priest João; then Ana de Sousa, the queen of the Ndongo (who live in what is today Angola); Duarte from Nsai; Petro from Kakongo; and Suzanne from Nóbrega. It's all accompanied by the sound of a Renaissance recitative.

In a fever, de Mattos sees Silva as Porto, a confused old man who picks a fight with the monkeys and thinks Silva is Livingstone, the 'explorer of Africa' who wanted to find the source of the Nile; intermittently, de Mattos also believes he is himself Livingstone, but then prefers Camões, the legendary world traveller and author of the *Lusiads* with its real and invented travel routes around Africa to India; he can also speak Italian.

At one point, the two drink a toast 'to civilisation!' Another time, to lament the loss of Zaire, the region that was dotted with Portuguese trading posts before it became the Belgian colony cruelly bled white by King Leopold II, while the Dutch, French, Germans, and British divided among them the territories on the other shore of the Congo. Hugo Vieira da Silva always wanted to shoot a film in Angola. *Posto avançado do progresso* is a film that casts a garish light on the murky profits of four hundred years of Portuguese colonial history, still swathed in mist, the history of a world power based on human trafficking, not palm oil, and whose gruesome dimensions are still not clear even to the Portuguese themselves.

Scolding one another as slave traders will not make the white ghosts die; as long as the leopards don't write their own history, the stories will glorify only the hunters. The film knows this, as well.

*Marie-Hélène Gutberlet, Frankfurt am Main, January 2016*



Hugo Vieira da Silva was born in Porto, Portugal, in 1974. After studying law at the Catholic University in Oporto from 1992 to 1995, he earned a degree in Directing from the Escola Superiore de Teatro e Cinema in Lisbon. *Posto avançado do progresso* is his third feature-length fiction film. Hugo Vieira da Silva currently lives and works in both Vienna and Lisbon.

### Films

2006: *Body Rice* (120 min.). 2011: *Swans* (126 min., Berlinale Forum 2011). 2016: *Posto avançado do progresso / An Outpost of Progress*.