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Black Gaze Cinema in Portugal: a transnational counterpublic against erasure

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ABSTRACT

This article critically analyses the development of Black Cinema in Portugal in the 21st century. I argue that this cinema evolves alongside a transnational counterpublic sphere and constitutes a particular cinematic genre that contributes to alleviating the cultural and epistemic erasure to which Black communities and their history have been subjected in Portugal. I characterise Black Cinema in Portugal, considering the predominant themes and common characteristics in the films produced in this context and reflecting on the challenges faced and the strategies to overcome difficulties. The present work constitutes an initial attempt to understand the phenomenon of Black Cinema in Portugal. Thus, this reflection is also part of the same effort against erasure.

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Introduction

In Portugal, concerning the production of moving images, the creative drive of traditionally silenced voices – i.e. minority groups: immigrants or Afro-descendants – has given rise to a transnational counterpublic sphere supported by political and social movements. This artistic potency can assert new sensibilities and affections in a growing wave of questioning contemporary life's prevailing imperial and global paradigms.

This work constitutes an initial effort of reflection on a collection of scattered films. It is a critical compilation and a comprehensive sketch that seeks to document a moment in the production and circulation of moving images in Portugal. Since systemic racism, which also permeates academia, persists in treating Black subjects and Black communities as objects of study while ignoring their discursive production (e.g. Kilomba 2010), the emergence of a Black cinematographic discourse is at risk of being erased. Therefore, this work also constitutes a counter-erasing gesture.

My thesis is that Black Cinema in Portugal develops in parallel and concurrently with a transnational counterpublic sphere, constituting a distinct cinematic genre that actively seeks to combat the cultural and epistemic erasure to which Black communities and their history have been and continue to be subjected in Portugal. The transnational nature of this Movement emerges from the old routes of the transatlantic slave trade – African countries,

Brazil, Portugal – re-signifying them into life projects and the construction of a shared future. It establishes itself as a powerful voice in re-evaluating the field of experience, to build a new relationship with our expectations for the future. According to Nancy Fraser (1990), counterpublic spheres are discursive arenas that develop parallel to official public spheres, where members of marginalised social groups construct and circulate counter-discourses to formulate interpretations of their identities, interests and needs. To transnationalise the public sphere (Fraser, et al. 2014) implies thinking of the group of subjects belonging to it as interwoven within a set of structures and/or institutions that affect their lives far beyond their citizenships. The public opinion produced in the interactions of a public sphere is considered valid if its construction results from a process in which all those affected can participate as equals, regardless of their citizenship. I here defend the existence of a transnational counterpublic sphere, composed of individuals from Angola, Brazil, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Portugal, joined by Afro-Europeans of various origins, whose discursive product is Black Cinema.

This article is situated within critical theory, especially concerning the framework of public sphere theory, and also within cultural studies, particularly in the underlying notion of culture, which is of culture as a circuit of discourse and power, materialised in concrete products. The work also draws contributions from post-colonial and decolonial studies, as well as from Black feminism, visual culture and studies on cinema.

To understand the status of Black Cinema in Portugal, it is relevant to ask which voices are highlighted in these cinematic works. What are the themes, worldviews, and aesthetic and ethical proposals of these films? What challenges do these productions face within the cultural circuit of Portuguese cinema? To answer these questions, this work is structurally divided into two parts, each with three sections: first, the foundation of the study and contextualisation of the subject; second, the results and findings.

In the first section of the first part, I propose a methodological reflection in which I present the research practices I chose throughout the investigation that led to this text. In the second section of this first part, I will contextualise the formation of the mentioned Black transnational (transatlantic) counterpublic sphere, delving a little into its origins, but focusing especially on its configurations today. In the last section of this first part, I seek to analyse the emergence of Black Portuguese cinema. I relate this phenomenon to Black Cinema on a global scale, before focusing on how it has developed in Portugal. In this section, I will also provide a review of the current state of Black Cinema in Portugal, referencing the few existing studies and my involvement in this process and highlighting the questions raised by the presence of this cinematography that have yet to be answered.

In the second part, results and discussion, I begin by presenting a group of authors and describing the general characteristics of the films they create, in terms of genre, length, filming production and locations. The core moment of this work is the discussion on the predominant themes and common characteristics in the films produced in this context – an in-between condition; the effort to decolonise history and the search for ancestrality; the feminist critic/oppositional gaze; and the assertion of a Black voice. Finally, I will approach the challenges Black Cinema faces regarding production, financing and distribution, focusing on the resisting strategies found by this transnational counterpublic to overcome difficulties. I will sustain my reflection by relating it to concrete examples.

Being a critical discursive work, in the sense that it aims to contribute to the production of discourse rather than merely reflect on an existing discourse, I do not present a definitive

conclusion, only some final considerations that, I hope, will open new paths for research. My purpose is to contribute to light the strength of Black Cinema in Portugal as a medium to reveal the ways of being and knowing that have played a significant role in shaping Portugal as a state and nation over time, despite being systematically erased from official narratives.

Part I – foundation of the study and contextualisation of the subject

Research practice against erasure

I choose the term ‘research practices’ because it seems more aligned with the spirit of my research process than ‘methodology’ or even ‘methodological choices’, among other commonly used terms. Research practice includes activities such as choosing a topic or writing in the full sense of a critical process (Johnson et al. 2004). The word ‘practice’ emphasises action, process and production. It highlights the unstable nature of work that involves ongoing questioning: its gradual development and its dialogic character; and it implies the possibility of adjusting methods to new questions and challenges, and of leaving the work open to other sources: people, texts and, very importantly, the unexpected.

This text marks the beginning, not the end, of an investigation; it conveys my initial reflection on Portuguese Black Cinema and on the counterpublic sphere that produces it, positioning itself as the inaugural moment of a research process that will unfold into a series of studies I will develop over the coming years. I aimed to articulate a critical discursive analysis of the information I have gathered over recent years on the production of Black Cinema in Portugal.

My involvement with the Black Movement in Portugal began in the 1990s with the formation of SOS Racismo, the first anti-racist association in Portugal. The Black Movement in Portugal has been self-designated as such since the mid-2010s and consists of a series of groups/associations/collectives that work on different fronts of the anti-racist struggle: advocating for the right to decent housing, promoting a non-racist education, fighting for the memorialisation of Black presence in public spaces, combating institutional violence, among other aspects of structural and systemic racism in the country. In recent years, the emergence of UNA – the Black Union of the Arts, which functions as a sort of union for Black artists in Portugal and includes many Black filmmakers, makes evident that the connection and, at times, the overlap between the Black Movement in Portugal and the transnational counterpublic sphere that produces cinema are undeniable. This closeness, stemming from shared struggles and the fact that I personally know many filmmakers, has facilitated and, in some ways, driven the work. I watched and re-watched all the films mentioned in this text (without exception), and in this case, watching films is already research practice. Access to the films was made easier by, as I mentioned, knowing those who make them, but also through word of mouth, sharing contacts and making a consistent effort to be present at all screenings and activities related to cinema, thereby also building a relationship of trust with my interlocutors.

In addition to the films and the testimonies of filmmakers I spoke with, my sources include information published during the promotion of the works, as well as the few studies produced about this cinema, which I will discuss later. I subject the collected information to critical discursive analysis, with the assistance of authors in Black Cinema studies, gaze, race, discourse and memory.

It is not for lack of theoretical, critical production that we still live in societies that erase non-white knowledge. Charles W. Mills (1997) discusses how knowledge systems in the West have historically erased or overlooked non-Western perspectives, particularly those of Black and Indigenous people. The author's critical concept of 'epistemology of ignorance' illustrates how certain groups' knowledge and experiences are systematically ignored or erased, portraying 'white ignorance' as 'active, dynamic, that refuses to go quietly' (2007, 13). A couple of years earlier, in *The Black Atlantic* (1995), Paul Gilroy – using the transnational concept of diaspora – discussed the contribution of non-white cultures to Western culture, complexifying and enriching our understanding of modernity.

However, the right to be a knower and the right to be perceived as a knower are still inequitably distributed in society. According to Miranda Fricker (2007), two types of epistemic injustice refer to how individuals are wronged, specifically in their capacity as knowers. Testimonial injustice occurs when a person's credibility is unfairly deflated because of prejudices against their social identity (e.g. race, gender, class), and hermeneutical injustice, when there is a gap in collective interpretive resources that prevents certain groups from making sense of or articulating their experiences.

Arts production and validation are not neutral, and the dominant epistemic community can suppress, distort or exclude other groups' ways of knowing and doing. Erasure can happen passively (by omission) or actively (by intentional suppression), but both forms result in a loss of diversity and reinforce dominant perspectives.

Black Cinema in Portugal faces two distinct levels of erasure. On the first level, the narratives of these works combat the erasure of Afrocentric histories and memories, the erasure of Black presence in Portugal, the erasure of Black contributions to who we are and even the erasure of Black political proposals for our shared future. On the second level, there is the struggle against the erasure of these works themselves and their creators, which would invalidate the effort made to document the narratives they contain. With my work, I aim to contribute to giving visibility to and demonstrating the importance of Black Cinema in Portugal.

Gazing at a transnational counterpublic sphere

In the contemporary world, post-colonial diasporas have played a catalytic role in the process of reconstructing cultural identities, as they have accelerated and accentuated cultural transit and translation (Hall 1989, 1992). Black Cinema in Portugal is an uneven and incomplete production of meaning and values, often stemming from immeasurable demands and practices, produced in the act of social survival – 'Culture as a survival strategy is both transnational and translational' (Bhabha 1994). It is transnational, owing to the displacements resulting from the complexity, mobility and permeability of cultural and political borders, even considering the criminalisation of lifestyles perceived as foreign (Giuliani 2021) and all the obstacles created to hinder the movement of racialised bodies and those from the Global South. It is translational because the narratives of displacement and the subjectivity that emerge from them demand the expansion of the very concept of Culture. Whatever the understanding of this complex and polysemic idea, the concept of Culture must now include the difference: the Other. This reformulation thus goes beyond the mere recognition of difference and perceives Culture as this interplay of articulation and expression of

singularities and, very importantly, the interplay of creating meaning and authority. In this way, we are talking about culture not as the result of production (cultivation) but as the very circulation of discourse and, therefore, power.

The idea of a transnational public sphere has come a relatively long way and is often used as something that goes without saying. A thorough reflection on what is at stake is beyond the scope of this article. However, there will be a series of demonstrations to be made in a proper space to theorise this movement as a counterpublic and especially as a transnational counterpublic – a junction that is also not self-explanatory. From the outset, combining critical theory and post-colonial criticism in the same argument seems counterproductive, since post-colonial criticism of the public sphere theory is extensive and well founded. To give just two examples, authors such as Sanjay Seth (2021) remind us that from Habermas onwards, the theory of the public sphere is Eurocentric and parochial, and previously Kimberly Hutchings (2014) criticised Nancy Fraser for transnationalising the public sphere without de-Eurocentring it, noting that much of the world has never been Westphalian. I also recall that struggles, for example for Independence, in colonised countries have always been transnational.

The criticisms seem fair to me; however, the idea of the public sphere continues to appear useful for thinking and contributing to social change. The truth, as Fraser et al. (2014) remind us, is that we are all modern, in the sense that we live in a world created by modernity, although this construction has revealed and continues to reveal itself in different ways in different parts of the world. Counterpublics, as the concept is developed and discussed by theorists such as Fraser (1990), Squires (2002) and Warner (2002), are discursive spaces of counternarrative building and political opposition to the dominant public. In this case, I speak of a counterpublic that lives in transit between various countries, which shares a historical memory of oppression and resistance – being heir to the counterpublic responsible for the independence of the Portuguese colonies in Africa – as well as the consequences of living in a structurally racist and anti-Black world. Additionally, this counterpublic shares the language of the coloniser (Portuguese), cultural codes and international institutions (including the media, but also specific legislation among this set of countries) and claims a set of political solutions that could potentially affect all involved, becoming a transnational counterpublic sphere

In Portugal, Black resistance and the fight for recognition have a long history, spanning from 16th-century Black confraternities (Tinhorão 2018), including the anti-racist organisations of the First Republic and the generation that fought for the independence of African countries (Roldão, Varela, and Pereira 2023) to late 20th-century immigrant associations, encompassing various forms and expressions of struggle over time. There are two pivotal junctures in the recent reorganisation of Black counterpublic sphere, in Portugal. The first emerged after the end of the Portuguese empire and the protracted 48-year Salazarian dictatorship, during which African migrants' associations took shape (Santos and Vasconcelos 2019). This phase culminated in the 1990s when African descendants embarked on the development of counter-narratives, notably post-colonial and anti-racist narratives, within academia and the arts. The second moment corresponds to the initial two decades of the 21st century, marked by activists and artists harnessing digital media to amplify their voices. Distinctive attributes of this surge in activism and the formation of a Black transnational counterpublic sphere include, firstly, the expansion of an informed and politically engaged

middle class among the Portuguese Black community and, second, the emergence of a new and highly politicised segment within the Black movement – namely, African and Afro-Brazilian youth, frequently arriving in Portugal through engagement with Portuguese academia (Giuliani and Pereira 2023).

Portugal imagined itself, over time, as a nation especially suited to relating to other peoples and cultures. This construction was particularly strengthened after World War II, in the 1950s and 1960s, when the fascist Portuguese regime transformed the lusotropicalist theory of Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre (2001) into an ideological hornbook to justify the continuation of the colonial regime (Castelo 1998). The lusotropicalist imaginary still permeates Portuguese society today, resulting in a strong denial of existing racism. However, alongside the everyday testimonies of racialised subjects – Black, Roma and Asian – recent academic studies have demonstrated the existence and persistence of systemic racism in the country in terms of law, justice and public policies (Maeso 2021), housing policies (Alves 2021) and education (Roldão 2019), to name just a few examples.

In addition to varying degrees of segregation and pervasive invisibility, contingent upon the interplay of class, gender and geographic factors, this intricate social landscape fosters the cultivation of self-representation among those who have been marginalised. Interrogating the ramifications of the triad encompassing colonialism, capitalism and patriarchy (Quijano 1997), Afro-descendants emerge prominently on the cultural, artistic and political stage. Notably, women frequently assume leadership roles within this Black transnational counterpublic sphere, serving as vocal advocates for a burgeoning Afro-Portuguese generation of activists, artists and advocates who vehemently reject the intertwined system of oppression that their forebears endured and the erasure of their modes of knowing and living.

Emerging of Black Cinema in Portugal: social and artistic context

Heir to the Third Cinema,¹ often associated with World Cinema,² Accented Cinema or Diasporic Cinema³ (Naficy 2001), Black Cinema is generally characterised by a political posture that aims to build an affirmative image of Black cultures. Alongside the quest for Black representation, the 1970s ushered in the worldwide expansion of Black Cinema (Diawara 1993).

Film production in Portugal did not follow these trends owing to the extensive dictatorial regime (1933–1974) and consequent socio-economic turmoil, accompanied by the social exclusion of the Black population. However, as already mentioned, at the turn of the century, the ease of information exchange enabled the reorganisation of the Black counterpublic sphere in Portugal, namely through the growth of an informed middle class of Portuguese Afro-descendants and the arrival of Black students to Portuguese academia from African countries formerly colonised by Portugal, and from Brazil (Giuliani and Pereira 2023). This transnational counterpublic sphere (which shares the Portuguese language, and a common heritage related to race and colonialism) constitutes the social background that sustains a discourse of counter-representation emerging in cultural, artistic and political spheres, publicly calling to question the effects of the colonialism, capitalism and patriarchy triad (Pereira, Sales, and Cabecinhas 2020).

In this context, the last two decades have witnessed the rise of film production by Black immigrants and Afro-descendants in Portugal and the growth of a cinema network that extends to Portuguese-speaking countries. The first publication about this film production

was featured in a daily newspaper, and its title was 'Is there a Black Cinema in Portugal?' (Henriques 2018). The article presented a group of Black directors working in Portugal and was sided by a reflection on the subject (Pereira 2018) regarding the representation of Black subjects in Portuguese cinema across time. The first scholarly attempt to approach Black Gaze Cinema in Portugal occurred in 2019/2020, with the project: 'On the margins of Portuguese Cinema' in which I was a researcher. Its outputs are a cartography of Black directors and their oeuvre, a collection of interviews (Sales 2020) and some articles on films (e.g. Pereira and Cerqueira 2020). After these initial efforts, no more studies on Black Cinema were conducted in Portugal, leaving almost all the essential questions regarding this cinematographic production to be answered, namely what it brings to cinema and specifically to cinema in Portugal. What are the themes, worldviews, and aesthetic and ethical proposals of these films?

Part II – results and findings

Who, what and where?

The transnational counterpublic sphere I consider includes the following filmmakers (in alphabetical order): Ana Tica (Portugal/Cape Verde); Ângelo Torres (São Tomé and Príncipe); Bataclan 1950 (Afro-descendant collective from Lisbon, Chelas' neighbourhood); Carla Fernandes (Angola/Portugal); Ciomara Morais (Angola/Portugal); David J. Amado (Jamaica/United States/Portugal); Denise Fernandes (Cape Verde/Portugal); Filipe Henriques (Portugal/Guinea-Bissau); Hamilton Trindade (São Tomé and Príncipe/Portugal); Hoji Fortuna (Angola/Portugal); Kiluanji Liberdade (Angola/Portugal); Leão Lopes (Cape Verde/Portugal); Lolo Arziki (Cape Verde/Portugal); Maíra Zenun (Brazil/Portugal); Mário Monteiro – Boss (Cape Verde); Melissa Rodrigues (Portugal/Cape Verde); Pocas Pascoal (Angola/Portugal); Silas Tiny (São Tomé and Príncipe/Portugal); Vanessa Fernandes (Guinea-Bissau/Portugal); Welket Bungué (Guinea-Bissau/Portugal); Mónica de Miranda (Portugal/Angola); and Raquel Lima (Portugal/São Tomé and Príncipe).

Most of these works are short films and, in this respect, not different from Portuguese cinema in general, where short films are increasingly recognised as an artistic possibility.⁴ Nonetheless, in Black Cinema made in Portugal, I count seven feature films. Denise Fernandes directed *Hanami* (2024);⁵ Filipe Henriques directed *O Espinho da Rosa* (2013); Leão Lopes directed *Ilhéu de Contenda* (1997); Pocas Pascoal directed *Alda e Maria, por aqui tudo bem* (2013); and Silas Tiny directed three documentaries: *Bafata Filme Clube* (2011), *O Canto do Ossobó* (2017) and *Constelações do Equador* (2020).

Documentary has been a genre primarily used to record the anti-racist struggle and Black resistance over time, as seen in films like *Nós não viemos do Vazio* (2024) by Carla Fernandes, or *Nos Terra* by Ana Tica et al. (2013). However, surprisingly, Black Cinema in Portugal has mainly developed in fiction, although often with stories grounded in research conducted in archives. These archives can be familial, as in *Si Destino* (2016) by Vanessa Fernandes; they can belong to private institutions, as in *Time to Change* (2024) by Pocas Pascoal; or they can be public archives, as in the films of Mónica de Miranda.

These films have been shot in Portugal, Cape Verde, Angola, Guinea-Bissau and, more rarely, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Brazil. Regardless of the filming location, the production of the films is generally carried out in Portugal.

Black Cinema in Portugal

A set of common characteristics related to a structural and institutional universe that the mentioned authors share – which is why they can be seen as part of a transnational counterpublic sphere – allows me to declare the presence of Black Cinema in Portugal as a distinct film category, with a decolonising political potential and, thus, enriching the reconstruction of how we imagine ourselves as a society.

These Films institute a countervisuality (Mirzoeff 2011) by deconstructing hegemonic narratives on national identity and colonialism to rebuild a transnational memory (Assmann 2014) on the erased facets of history and repair our broken world (Azoulay 2019), by proposing alternative modes of imagining our shared future.

The following sections of this text are dedicated to exploring the common features found in these works; while it is true that many of these films embody the entirety of the listed characteristics, it is also true that they all share at least several of them.

An in-between condition

In Portugal, the life trajectories of Black Cinema authors are often characterised by migratory patterns. A significant portion of these creators either currently reside or have resided in Portugal, as well as in countries such as Germany, France, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands, among other European nations. The relationships that artists maintain with their countries of origin (or those of their parents) are readily apparent, manifesting through frequent visits to their ancestral lands in Africa or Brazil. The in-between condition of individuals who simultaneously identify as European, African and/or South American (Brazilian) (Sales 2020) is vividly reflected in the works they produce. This may perhaps be the most pervasive characteristic across the entire spectrum of Black Cinema (or cinema produced by Black diasporas) globally, as previously observed by Manthia Diawara (1993).

The experiences of mobility undertaken by filmmakers are transposed into their works and are also evident at the level of the issues addressed in their films, which would not be framed in the same manner were it not for the in-between condition of the characters. For instance, *Alda e Maria, por aqui tudo bem* (*Alda and Maria, everything is fine here*) (2011) by Pocas Pascoal – who was born in Angola and resides in Portugal and France – narrates the story of two sisters living in Lisbon. Yet, their hearts remain in Luanda, where their mother lives and where a civil war unfolds. The recurring phrase ‘por aqui tudo bem’ (everything’s fine here) is heard in their frequent phone calls between Lisbon and Luanda. The action of the film unfolds in the late 1980s, and the way Alda and Maria inhabit Lisbon is also marked by the transience between a Lisbon that was still under a fascist mentality, deeply conservative and racist, and its outskirts where Black Africans were being ‘dispersed’ as remnants of an empire that, in fact, never truly was, and of a lost war – the Colonial War (1961–1974) – that needed to be forgotten. The film sheds light on the untold history of the failed part of the Carnation Revolution, which occurred on 25 April 1974 and overthrew 48 years of fascist dictatorship. I am referring to the history of Black people in Portugal who were not included in development projects, decent housing, learning opportunities or Europeanisation efforts. However, they were cheap labour for major construction projects, cleaning public and private spaces, and caregiving.

In *Si Destino (Her Destiny)* (2016) by Vanessa Fernandes – who was born in Guinea-Bissau and has lived in France, Macau, Germany and Portugal – Awa's drama unfolds owing to the influence exerted by her family in Guinea-Bissau over her father in Lisbon. I will come back to this film, later in this text. Still, for now, I want to say that Awa's envisioned future in Lisbon is jeopardised by laws emanating from her parent's homeland and that the film portrays this pre-adolescent protagonist as completely forgotten by institutional protection in Lisbon.

The scope of this work does not allow me to delve into the analysis of all the films. Therefore, I will only mention a few more examples. Denise Fernandes, born in Lisbon to Cape Verdean immigrants, now residing in Italy, narrates in the film *Nha Mila (My Mila)* (2020) her journey towards a Cape Verdean Lisbon, as a woman in transit to Cape Verde with a stopover at Portela Airport (Lisbon). Conversely, filmmaker Welket Bungué, born in Guinea-Bissau, raised in Portugal and currently residing in Germany, has produced films in Lisbon, Guinea-Bissau and Brazil as part of a personal trajectory that finds this in-between space conducive to addressing questions of identity, memory and resistance in a cinema he terms 'self-representation' (Sales 2020). For instance, *Calling Cabral* (2022) is Bungué's journey to Guinea-Bissau and the Bijagós Islands, as well as a voyage into a revolutionary past, encountering Amílcar Cabral and projecting a message for the future. The film unfolds in this in-between space of a fertile past and an imagined future.

The examples could continue, as nearly all Black Cinema produced in Portugal engages in the process of transforming spatiotemporal perception and the (re)configuration of alterity, since the in-between space accommodates the different; it is neither the 'one' nor the 'other', but something beyond, interstitial (Bhabha 1994). Authors of Black Cinema in Portugal work on hybridity as they navigate a transit where space and time intersect to generate intricate figures of difference and identity, past and present, interior and exterior, inclusion and exclusion.

Decolonising history and the search for ancestrally

As a person of African descent from Guinean and Cape Verdean heritage, I have always been whispered to remember, to be capable of forgiveness, but not to forget the experience of my enslaved and colonized ancestors, and that is why I made this film, precisely so as not to forget. (Vanessa Fernandes 2016, 12)

A significant portion of cinema produced in Portugal is filmed in Africa and in Brazil. Since the 1990s, there has been a trend of Portuguese cinema expanding into the South and revisiting history. However, the uniqueness of Black Cinema in Portugal, in comparison with Portuguese cinema (as a whole), lies in its decolonising ontology. The films produced within this transnational counterpublic sphere represent an effort to revisit history with 'different eyes' and introduce new perspectives into prevailing narratives. Often, the filmmaking project arises from an intimate need on the part of the authors to connect with or rekindle their roots, as mentioned by individuals like Silas Tiny or Vanessa Fernandes in interviews (Sales & Pereira 2019a, 2019b). This initial impetus can lead to a film about a specific character, such as *Nho Simplicio (My Simplicio)* (2012) by Pedro da Conceição, a documentary about the life and thoughts of Simplicio, a Cape Verdean basket weaver, or *O Solo Sagrado da Terra (The Sacred Soil of the Earth)* (2019) by Ângelo Torres, a film about the poet al.da Espírito Santo, an essential figure in São Toméan culture. However, fiction allows for the broadening of the

scope of the stories told, such as reflecting on the memories of slavery (*Tradição e Imaginação/ Tradition and Imagination*, a short film by Vanessa Fernandes, 2018) or on colonialism (*Ilheu de Contenda/Struggle Islet* a feature film by Leão Lopes, 1997), or even on the memories that emanate from it (*O canto do Ossobó, The singing of the Ossobó bird*, by Silas Tiny, 2017).

The memory alluded to in the excerpt by Vanessa Fernandes that serves as the epigraph to this section is also present in works filmed in Portugal. *The Island* (2022) by Mónica de Miranda, who was born in Portugal, from Angolan ancestors, and studied in the UK, is an attempt to imagine a place engaged in decolonising. In this place, where time is spiralised, a group of Black people (who function as archetypes) speculate, along a physical and mental journey, about the humanity they believe themselves to be, destabilising the fixed images of coloniality. The inhabitants of this (in-between reality and imagination) Island are perhaps approaching the enchanted science and the epistemology of African *macumbas* (Brasileiro 2021; Simas and Rufino 2018) to (re)find themselves. In this movement, they prepare a new epistemological path to get rid of the colonial burden and open the way for other presences and forms of life. The human person becomes a crossroads of encounters and possible alliances with other species and with other matters. The eco-feminist camera of Mónica de Miranda guides us on a trip of two women, two men and several children who learn to challenge the patriarchal logic of the Human as universal, superior, continuous and evolutionary, perceiving themselves as a becoming Humanity-Other, by the concomitance of multiple presences, water, stone, tree, grass, horse, fire, etc., and of multiple humans, more-than-human and spectral persons. The act of inscribing the perspective of the colonised into History is also quite evident in films like *Mikambaru* (an invented word) (2017) by Vanessa Fernandes, which can be interpreted as a metaphor for racism, exoticisation and imperialism.

Critic and feminism

Despite the positive evolution in recent decades (Pereira 2016), the world of cinema in Portugal remains, not surprisingly, predominantly occupied by white men from middle- and upper-class backgrounds in urban settings. However, the 'Portuguese cinematic family' also includes many women who generally assume well-defined positions within the hierarchy: besides actresses, they work as makeup artists, script supervisors and production assistants, among other roles, all well below the pinnacle of the power pyramid. The scarcity of female directors in the film industry is not offset by high productivity among those who still manage to make films (Burnay et al. 2023).

The transnational counterpublic sphere of Black Cinema not only counters the elitism inherent in traditional cinematic 'families' but also is significantly more gender-equal. Of the auteurs mentioned, approximately half are women. Moreover, women often produce, write and direct the films and promote the exhibition circuits. Furthermore, both in academia and in the media, those who have dedicated themselves to thinking about Black Cinema in Portugal have predominantly been women, thus challenging the established patriarchal power dynamics.

Perhaps for this reason, Black Cinema in Portugal is characterised by an 'Oppositional Gaze' (hooks 1992), representing a critically reflective form of resistance developed by racialised subjects, particularly Black women. The term 'gaze' implies a power dynamic between

the one who gazes and the one who is the object of that gaze. By rejecting the assumed white male gaze (Mulvey 1975), the Oppositional Gaze transcends the traditional distinctions between spectator and subject. It refuses to derive pleasure from looking, resists voyeurism and instead places itself under the control of a self-determined subject. The Oppositional Gaze presents reality as experienced by those who are Othered, marginalised outside the confines of the prevailing cultural production establishment.

Black Cinema thus emerges as a genre of counter-visibility (Mirzoeff 2011), seeking to elucidate the unreality perpetuated by the authoritative imposition of visibility and offering an alternative perspective. Gazing becomes a political act rooted in rebellion and defiance, signifying an acknowledgement, and understanding of the Othered. For far too long, the power of the gaze in media has rested in the hands of the established status quo. However, when artists outside the hegemonic sphere create art, they unveil a world that mirrors the reality experienced by those who dare to transcend it. When the oppositional gaze challenges the 'male gaze' or the hegemonic gaze, Black directors assert their right to identity and their ability to perceive and document the world they intimately know and inhabit.

In addition to new approaches to classic cinema themes, directors like Lolo Arziki, Maíra Zenun and Vanessa Fernandes have brought new themes to Portuguese cinema. Their films address questions of identity and belonging, making significant contributions to the processes of decolonisation. These directors interrogate colonial, post-colonial and anti-colonial histories and their legacies, rethinking the power dynamics between Portugal, Brazil and various African countries. For example, Lolo Arziki's debut film, *Relatos de uma rapariga nada pudica* (*Tales of a not at all prudish girl*) (2016), serves as both the author's personal manifesto as a Black lesbian woman and a trenchant critique of the colonial and Christian repressive legacy in Cape Verde. Maira Zenun's poetic film *A Cidade e o Amor* (*The city and the Love*) (2017) draws from the experiences of a group of Brazilians in Lisbon, characterised as 'beautiful, Black, fluttering ...' and explores themes of love and encounter in a Black Lisbon. Raquel Lima collaborates with her mother, Maria Palmira Joaquim, to create *O essencial é a fome* (*The essential thing is hunger*) (2020), a conversational film exploring the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of Black women.

The aforementioned *Si Destino* (*Her Destiny*) (2015), directed by Vanessa Fernandes, holds the distinction of being the first Portuguese cinematic exploration of female genital mutilation, shedding light on the silences and concealed dynamics associated with this practice. *Si Destino* delves into the profound influence of tradition and the formidable challenges involved in transcending it. The film underscores the inescapability of a predetermined life path from the moment of birth, especially for women who are born into Guinean heritage, specific social strata and religious groups. Consequently, it emerges as an exploration of the fragility inherent in endeavours aimed at breaking free from preordained trajectories and the very essence of life itself. Despite Abdulay (the father) challenging established traditions, the film emphasises the enduring difficulty of living in alignment with such questioning. In this context, *Si Destino* also offers a poignant portrayal of the subtle circulation of power within families and communities. It underscores that the defence of tradition often masks a desire to maintain control over the most vulnerable members of the community.

The isolation faced by these communities in Portugal leads to the perpetuation of practices that operate beyond the scope of institutional 'democratic' control. Awa's oppression originates from multiple sources that intersect and amplify her struggles: as a child, her voice

is disregarded; as a woman, she becomes a victim of female genital mutilation; as a person of African descent, she experiences isolation from peers of her age and maintains only one friend who shares her Guinean background. Additionally, her immigrant status further compounds her challenges, as she lacks convenient access to support structures within the country of her residence.

The concept of Intersectionality – the convergence of intersecting axes of oppression that mutually reinforce each other (Crenshaw 1991) – is very prevalent in these works. The ideas of eco-feminism (Shiva and Mies 1993), womanism (Walker 1983) and decolonial feminism, in a broader sense, often emerge as possible pathways towards the construction of a better world.

Assertion of a Black voice

Since the 1990s, the outskirts of Lisbon and its Black neighbourhoods have proven to be an attractive dramatic source for Portuguese cinema. Numerous documentary and fiction film projects focus on the so-called ‘problematic neighbourhoods’. Some of these films are offensive to Black people, while others do not allow them to feel represented.

In the first decades of the 21st century, a set of narratives about Black subjects in Portugal, often filmed in peripheral neighbourhoods of Lisbon, authored by Black people residing in Portugal, frequently within the same neighbourhoods, sought not only to bring some truth to cinematic discourse but, more importantly, to ensure the representation of subalternised individuals in their own voices. In 2013, Ana Tica, Nuno Pedro and Tony Polo directed *Nos Terra (Our Land)*, a documentary exploring the conflict experienced by young people from the Black neighbourhood Cova da Moura who belong to two irreconcilable worlds. These young individuals were born in Lisbon but identify as Cape Verdean; they are Portuguese but are not readily accepted outside the neighbourhood where they are expected to remain. *Chelas nha kau – (Chelas My place – 2020)* is a documentary made by the collective Bataclan 1950 about the neighbourhood of Chelas. The film showcases the process of recording the music video Chelas City and aims to be a manifesto for the unity of all areas of the neighborhood. It is a relevant work not only for its aesthetic and rhythmic approach but also for its collective production and the way it corrects the neighborhood’s portrayal in cinema.

Welket Bungué directed, among several short films, *Arriaga* (2019), a film depicting the struggle to resist violent responses from those subjected to extreme violence by the social, political and economic systems. The same filmmaker created *Eu Não sou Pilatus (I am not Pilatus)* in 2020, a poignant film that critiques racism in Portugal and asserts the right to the polis for the Black population. *I am not Pilatus* is an anti-racist artistic manifesto created through the dialogue between two mobile phone videos circulated on social media, which bear witness to two distinct and opposing perspectives on Portugal, democracy and its institutions. One of these videos expresses the complete rejection of a civil rights demonstration on Avenida da Liberdade in Lisbon, despite Avenida da Liberdade traditionally being associated with public protest actions. The other is a denunciation of the police intervention (police brutality) in the Jamaica neighbourhood, which gave rise to the demonstration. From the outset, saying ‘I am not Pilatus’ is a political stance. ‘I am not Pilatus’ means ‘I don’t wash my hands like Pilatus; I don’t abstain, I don’t bury my head in the sand, I don’t look the other way, I don’t ignore the problem.’ By saying, ‘I am not Pilatus’, Welket Bungué implicitly poses a question: ‘and you?’

Nós Não Viemos do Vazio – We Did not Come From the Void (2024) by Carla Fernandes continues the author's longstanding work in fostering the creation of 'habits of pronunciation' among the African and Afro-descendant population in Lisbon. The film can be divided into three narrative threads that intertwine and engage with each other. The first is a multi-voiced reflection on the presence of Black bodies in Lisbon from the 15th century to the present day, but also on how that presence has been erased and remains indelible in the bodies of successive generations of Black people in Lisbon. The second narrative thread addresses specific contemporary cases in the struggle for the memorialisation of the contribution of Black people to who we are as a society, such as the 'Memorial to the Honouring of Enslaved People' proposed by Djass – Afro-descendant Association, or the statue of Father Paulino, an initiative by Batoto Yetu. Finally, parallel with the previous ones, a narrative thread reflects on the reasons behind the programme of erasure and the political project that shaped the imagination of a white and imperial Lisbon, concurrent with the expulsion to its margins of those who do not fit this construction.

The assertion of a Black voice is also evident in films such as *O Espinho da Rosa* (*The Rose Thorn*) (2014) by Filipe Henriques, the first feature-length fiction film entirely produced, written, directed and acted by Black subjects in Portugal. It is a thriller with a storyline rooted in sexual abuse, and a series of legends, deep-rooted beliefs and traditional African tales enhance its narrative complexity.

Facing and overcoming obstacles

Black filmmakers struggle to become part of the 'Portuguese cinema family', and obtaining the necessary funding to make a film is challenging. This difficulty is tied to one of the many veiled aspects of structural racism: inheritance, one of the social gravity forces (McNamee and Miller 2004) that, along with the better-known discrimination, works to keep subjects in the social place/class where they were born. These forces of social gravity are also at the basis of the erasure of Black artists and their production.

Regarding financing, few film projects authored by Black creators in Portugal receive funding from traditional cinema support circuits. Films that have received support from the ICA (Institute of Cinema and Audiovisual) are typically presented by production companies with experience in the industry, thus operating within the established frameworks for accessing financing. For instance, Leão Lopes obtained financing for his feature film *Ilheu de Contenda* (*Struggle Islet*) in the late 1990s as part of the Portuguese cinema's expansion movement into Africa (Cunha 2018). Vermedia produced the film, and the director later collaborated with LX Filmes. Silas Tiny received support for the documentaries *Bafatá Film Clube* (2012) and *O Canto do Ossobó* (*The Singing of the Ossobó Bird*) (2017) through the production companies Real Ficção and Divina Comédia, respectively. *O Espinho da Rosa* (*The Rose Thorn*) (2014) by Filipe Henriques was produced by Duxilin in co-production with Plural Entertainment Portugal, and Pocas Pascoal secured funding for her feature film *Alda e Maria por aqui tudo bem* (*Alda and Maria, everything is fine here*) (2011), produced by LX Filmes. Pascoal also collaborated with UKBAR Filmes on subsequent projects. However, Black and Afro-descendant filmmakers in Portugal often turn to crowdfunding and alternative channels for viewing and distribution, sometimes creating them themselves.

In 2024 in Guimarães emerged *Pedrada*, a production company exclusively dedicated to Black Cinema, to be made between Portugal, several African countries and Brazil. This production company joins the expertise of Portuguese, Cape Verdean and Guinean producers. I believe that this event is fundamental, and I hope that other Black Cinema producers emerge, since without people dedicated exclusively to production, Black Cinema will hardly be able to overcome structural difficulties.

Concerning film circulation, among the initiatives designed by this transnational counterpublic sphere to provide space for Black and decolonial filmmaking, we can highlight the '*Mostra Internacional de Cinema na Cova* – International Cinema Screening at Cova held in Cova da Moura'. This initiative has been promoted since 2016 by a group of Brazilian filmmakers led by Maira Zenun as part of the Kova M Festival. The Festival – which attracts thousands of people every year to its music, sports and gastronomy events – is conceived and organised by residents of the neighbourhood, who are also members of this transnational counterpublic sphere, through a process they call *djunta mon* [joining hands]. After the COVID-19 pandemic, it has been very difficult to restart both the Kova M Festival and Cinema Screening owing to the disarticulation of the fragile social network that made it possible and the incapacity of local power to understand the importance of supporting its continuity. The local power (town hall and parish council) supporting refusal is based – I risk saying – on racist perceptions of what these cultural happenings mean and on the fear of its growth in the number of participants and as a political resistance gathering. Along with the Kova M Festival, in July 2024 the Show returned, albeit in a reduced format, with fewer films and guests. Equally important is the '*MICAR*' (*Mostra Internacional de Cinema Antirracista* – International Screening of Antiracist Cinema), organised by SOS Racism, held annually in Porto, since 2014. SOS Racism is one of the oldest anti-racist associations currently operating in Portugal. Although MICAR is not a film screening exclusively dedicated to Black Cinema, showcasing anti-racist films of all genres, origins and eras, it has provided a space for viewing and discussing Black Cinema produced by the mentioned cinema sphere.

Both International Cinema Screening at Cova and MICAR are examples of how a transnational counterpublic sphere in Portugal has been creating alternative channels for the circulation of Portuguese Black Cinema while also serving as platforms for Brazilian Black Cinema and African cinema, and most importantly has been creating alternative channels for a cinema that often is at the same time Portuguese, from several African origins and Brazilian.

Spaces such as 'Hangar', the most prolific hub for the production and circulation of African arts and its diasporas in Lisbon, as well as 'A Rampa' and 'O INSTITUTO', both located in Porto, have also played significant roles in showcasing and experiencing Black Cinema.

A significant part of the Black Cinema produced within the scope of this transnational counterpublic sphere primarily circulates through film festivals and showcases, as well as in cinemas featuring specialised programming, often without even experiencing commercial premieres – also in African countries and Brazil. The public emergence of an anti-racist discourse, both nationally and internationally, has led, in recent years, to Portuguese film festivals and showcases incorporating some Black Cinema works into their programming. In Portugal, the anti-racist claims of the Black Movement (a transnational counterpublic sphere) have received some timid acceptance from mainstream cultural institutions. Batalha Cinema, for example, often includes Black films in its programming, not only from national but also from Black diasporas worldwide. However, examples of clearly anti-racist programming in mainstream cultural institutions in Portugal still are exceedingly rare.

Final remarks

The production and distribution of moving images constitute a potentially effective counterpublic sphere against epistemic erasure, given the images' durability, ease of reproduction and migration. In profoundly ocular-centric societies, cinema plays a predominant role in reshaping communities that can be imagined no longer from 'top-down' (Anderson 2006) but rather in a cumulative and performative manner, thus hybrid, constructed from the bottom up and in daily practice, with all the contradictions and risks inherent in this process. For it is from risks, instabilities and compromises that it will also emerge.

The counterpublic of Portuguese Black Cinema is shaped on the former slave trade routes but redefines them through projects of life. Black Cinema in Portugal suffers from an 'in-between' condition, which characterises the lives and identities of its creators, and often the stories and characters they bring to the screen. Moreover, this cinema is particularly committed to combating erasure through the decolonisation of history, unveiling traditionally invisible facets of it, and through the search for the ancestry of its creators, offering closure where nothing existed before (Hartman 2022). It constructs a transnational memory (Assmann 2014) of the erased aspects of history and aims to repair our fractured world (Azoulay 2019), by proposing alternative ways of imagining our shared future. Often produced, directed and promoted by women, this cinema embodies an oppositional gaze (hooks) and deconstructs hegemonic narratives on gender, race, national identity and colonialism, offering some reality to the illusion created by Western visibility (Mirzoeff 2011). This counterpublic did not emerge because its members wanted to be outsiders, but because social gravity forces have kept them from belonging to the official sphere. In this way, the assertion of a Black voice has been one of its main concerns, seeking, on one hand, to represent the present and past of Black communities in their voice and, on the other, to make clear what their proposals are for our shared future.

The effort to circulate this cinematography is significant in combating epistemic erasure, as cultural circuits (the circuit of power) are designed not so much to prevent production (which can serve power interests through cultural appropriation) but rather to hinder or even prevent its circulation and the validation of its authors.

As I mentioned, this text is just the starting point for the in-depth study of Black Cinema in Portugal, which I plan to develop in the coming years. In addition to deepening the points raised and the formal and individual analysis of the works, several questions emerge from this initial approach. For example, how does power circulate within this counterpublic? To what extent are the hierarchical dynamics inherited from European/Portuguese cinema reproduced? We can also question the phenomenon by examining its absences, such as the absence of Mozambique in this counterpublic. Is Black Cinema in Portugal working in an *intrasectonal* mode, as Raquel Lima (2021) suggests?

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Ana Cristina Pereira (AKA Kitty Furtado) is a cultural critic committed to blurring the boundaries between academia and the public sphere. She has curated exhibitions on (post)colonial cinema and fostered public discussions on Cultural Memory, Racism and Reparations. She is the creator and coordinator of the 'Oficina de Reparações' project (mala voadora, Porto 2023). Ana holds a PhD in Cultural Studies from the University of Minho with the thesis: 'Otherness and Identity in Cinematic Fiction in Portugal and Mozambique' (2019). Being an invited professor at FBAUP, at University of Porto, Ana is a contracted researcher (FCT-CEEC) at CECS (UMinho), where she is conducting the project 'The Black Gaze: An Interdisciplinary Analysis of Afro-Lusophone Cinema as Counterpublics in Portugal' and coordinates the research line 'Migrant Activisms' in the MigraMediaActs project. Ana was a post-doctoral researcher at CES (U. Coimbra) under the (De)Othering project (2020–2022) and researcher on the project 'À margem do cinema Português: estudo sobre cinema afrodescendente produzido em Portugal' (2018–2020), and led the Visual Culture Working Group at SOPCOM (2019–2024). She co-directs *VISTA: Journal of Visual Culture* (with Silvana Mota Ribeiro) and published the book *Abrir os gomos do tempo: conversas sobre cinema em Moçambique* (2022 – with Rosa Cabecinhas).

Notes

1. The concept of Third Cinema, which consisted of both a theory and a practice, was coined by two members of the group *Cine Liberación* – Fernando Solanas and Octávio Getino – in the manifesto *Toward a Third Cinema* (1969), based on their experience making the film *La hora de los hornos* – *The Hour of the Furnaces*. In it, they called for the decolonisation of culture through a counter-cinema. 'Third Cinema' distinguished it from the First Cinema (Hollywood) and Second Cinema (European art and auteur cinema). Intensely political, it was also called 'Third Cinema' because it emerged from countries outside the two major power spheres of the time – the Western (First World) and the Eastern (Second World) (Chanan 1997).
2. Conceived in the USA to designate all cinema made outside its canon, the idea of World Cinema has been profoundly questioned, either in terms of re-signifying it (e.g. Nagib 2006) or in terms of uncovering the forms of 'othering' that constitute it and that it still, albeit reluctantly, discursively tries to review (Gelardi 2016).
3. Accented Cinema and Diasporic Filmmaking refers to a filmmaking trend by post-colonial displaced individuals living in the West. Their personal experiences of exile or diaspora translate into cinema, developing stylistic similarities from open- and closed-form aesthetics to a nostalgic and memory-driven multilingual narrative and from emphasis on political agency to concern with identity and transgression of identity (Naficy 2001).
4. Short films in Portugal are featured in significant festivals such as Curtas Vila do Conde, and established filmmakers like Pedro Costa continue to create short films (e.g. *Filhas do Fogo*, 2024) alongside their feature-length works. Short films have also been the subject of academic reflection, naming an entire generation of filmmakers – the 'Short Film Generation' (Costa, 2000; Seabra 2000).
5. Revelation Prize 2014, at Locarno Cinema Festival.

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