

Sleepwalking Land (Terra Sonâmbula, 2007)

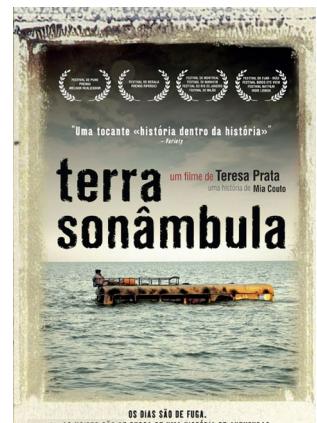
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dir. Teresa Prata; prod. António da Cunha Telles, Pandora da Cunha Telles; screenplay Teresa Prata; photography Dominique Gentil; music Alex Goretzki. 35mm, color, 97 mins. Filmes de Fundo, ICAM, distrib. Marfilmes.

»I am not your uncle.« This phrase, repeatedly uttered by one of the protagonists of Teresa Prata's 2007 *Terra Sonâmbula*, encapsulates the film's dominant melodramatic strategy. Here, this strategy is proposed as the sub-category of »solicitous melodrama«—solicitous signifying anxious, full of care or concern—and is suggested to have emerged, on the one hand, from the idiosyncratic conditions that have shaped Mozambican cinema, and, on the other hand, from the sentimental modes that have circulated in and through Mozambican cultural »ecology« (to use Beecroft's term).

Mozambican cinema is a comparatively new phenomenon. A long history of imperial occupations impeded the formation of a national consciousness and thus of national artistic production. Due to the technological requirements, cinematic production started particularly late. When cinema arrived in Mozambique in the 1890s, it was exclusively accessible to the Portuguese colonizer. In the 1960s, both the colonial state and advertising agencies began to see film as an effective means of propaganda, and thus built cinemas throughout the country and democratized access thereof. By the end of the 1960s, even a Mozambican-run cinematic laboratory was built (Piçarra, Power). Nevertheless, at independence »in 1975 Mozambique had neither film-makers nor production facilities« (Diawara 94). Post-independence, the single political party, Frelimo, successfully encouraged cinematic production, but the fifteen-year long and devastatingly brutal civil war (1977-92) that followed was »near fatal to the survival of cinema« (Arenas 103).

While attempts to rebuild the film industry were moderately successful during the 2000s, cinematic production was affected both short- and long-term. The lack of the means of production led to international collaborations (e.g. with Robert van Lierop and Jean-Luc Godard); to the need for foreign capital (e.g. from Portugal, Brazil, and the U.S.); and to a supranational area of circulation, which is nevertheless limited in scope as most Mozambican films are low budget and non-commercial, and therefore



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non-competitive (Arenas 10). Despite this internationalism, nationalism—translated formally as *Moçambicanidade* (»Mozambicaness«)—remains the horizon of national artistic production, and, due to the relative lack of cinematic tradition, film often draws on literary work. The first Mozambican feature film, *The Time of the Leopard* (1985), is a collaboration of Yugoslav director and prog rock legend Zdravko Velimirović and Mozambican author Luís Patraquim. *Terra Sonâmbula*, in turn, is an adaptation of Mia Couto's novel by the same name. The film, directed by the Portuguese Mozambican Teresa Prata, features an amateur Mozambican and Angolan cast and European funding and production with a budget of half a million euros. It was screened widely at international film festivals, while having negligible results at the box-office.

Nationalism and internationalism also shape *Terra*'s melodrama. The film is set during the civil war and has two storylines. In the first, Farida (played by Ilda Gonzalez) waits on a ship for Kindzu (played by Hélio Fumo), who is looking for Farida's son. However, marauders, who ambushed a bus and are slaughtering its passengers, also murder Kindzu. In the second storyline, Muidinga (a boy, played by Nick Lauro Teresa) and Tuahir (an old man, played by Aldino Jasse) flee from the violence, find the corpse-filled and burned bus, which they make their home. Muidinga finds Kindzu's diary and comes to believe he is Farida's son—the boy Kindzu is looking for. Eventually, he himself creates, invents, or dreams a river that possibly brings him to her.

The plot is dotted with *Moçambicanidade*. Renamo, Frelimo's main opposition in the war, frequently used bus attacks to terrorize society into paralysis, and the bus attack subsequently became a trope in Mozambican cultural production. Further, after the 1986 publication of Couto's *Voices Made Night*, the form that Prata calls *supra-realism*—present here in the form of creating a river—became central to Mozambican artistic production. Licínio Azevedo even argues that those who, for instance, disbelieve the »reality« that crocodile attacks are human-planned, or that »sorcerers ride hippos at night in the middle of the river,« cannot understand Mozambican cinema(tography) (38). Finally, *Terra*'s melodrama takes shape relative to the Mozambican sentimental mode of *narrações de sofrimento* (»narratives of suffering«; henceforth »NdS«) in two ways.

Luís Bernardo Honwana coined the term NdS in reference to Mozambican works thematizing African peasant life during »the colonial aggression« (2). Over time, NdS have adopted plots about the relentless violence of raw human suffering as their main narrative mechanism and have become a dominant sentimental narrative mode in literature. For example, in Aleluia's 1987 *Mbelele*, a taxi driver refuses the protagonist and his sick, infant child a ride to the hospital because they are poor and black, and the baby dies in front of the clinic. In Magaia's 1989 *Double Massacre*, bandits force a character to butcher a family member, and threaten to murder his family if he does not comply. In Mendes' 1965 *Portagem*, protagonist Xilim finds a source of subsistence after a novel-long job search, allowing him and his wife Luísa to live, albeit in poverty. Their competitor then lowers his prices, puts Xilim out of business, and rapes the nine-month pregnant Luísa. Xilim intervenes, but he leaves Luísa, who gives birth alone. Three days later, unable to walk and thus eat, Luísa's resources run out, and the baby dies in her arms.

Terra, the novel, subtly departs from NdS. It ends with Farida, waiting futilely for the murdered Kindzu, drenching herself in gasoline and setting herself ablaze. But it does not narrate suffering as explicitly as in the examples above. The adaptation more clearly (and intentionally, Vieira 2013) shifts from NdS towards a melodramatic plot.

It ends with a medium close-up of Kindzu dying, seeing but never reaching Farida's possible son, and realizing that his mission has failed. Yet Farida lives, and the river scene (re)unites her family (it may be a dream, and Muidinga may not be Farida's son).

The solicitous melodrama operates alongside and in friction with the melodramatic plot. Tuahir advocates throughout the story that »it is better to forget« everything. In lieu of forgetting, anxious and full of concern for Muidinga's wellbeing, he argues against feeling at all, because feeling, in the midst of ongoing brutality, leads to more suffering. Family relations are particularly off-limits. When Muidinga slumbers in the evening, Tuahir reproaches: »There you go again, thinking about your parents. Listen, your parents don't want to know if you're alive. [...] In war time, children are a burden.« Whenever Muidinga calls Tuahir »uncle,« he responds with familial denialism: »I am not your uncle.«

The melodramatic character of Tuahir's wholesale rejection of feelings intensifies, particularly relative to the novel, through the amateur overacting: making the rejection appear exaggerated and insincere. This is foregrounded more by the film's minimal(ist) settings and images, which put the performance center stage, as well as by the warm-color texture of *Terra*'s celluloid format. Yet exaggeration and insincerity are functional and result from the dual impossibility of having/not having social and familial relations. Tuahir clarifies how he saved Muidinga from being buried alive, grew attached (»all you did was vomit, but then you learned how to laugh«), and gave Muidinga the name of his lost son. Insincerity thus characterizes Tuahir's dilemma. »I am not your uncle« anxiously rejects familial relations out of concern, and (but also because) it signals »I am not your uncle—I am your father.« »Father«—or, translated more accurately, »elder«—is also Tuahir's social function, which paradoxically forces him to insist that Muidinga rejects feelings and family relations to protect him from (further) suffering. Of course, attachment is reciprocal, and at the end of the narrative, when Tuahir dies in Muidinga's arms, the latter is devastated.

If feelings are fundamentally social, as affect studies scholars like Sianne Ngai have invariably demonstrated, the narrative mode of the »solicitous melodrama« emerges precisely from the breakdown of the social. In the Mozambican case, this is a retrospective narrative mode, and it is questionable if a Mozambican director would indeed have combined it with a melodramatic plot. Even at the time of *Terra*'s release, Tuahir's preferred strategy still echoed through the country's artistic production: »It is better to forget.«

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