

Pilar Monsell

AFRICA 815, PARADISE LOST

Africa 815—the first feature film by Pilar Monsell (Cordoba, 1979)—is a piece that explores many questions using an overwhelmingly confessional voice. The film problematizes the personal diaries of the director's father using images and thoughts that bring the past into the present, that unite the now with the possible, and which create a (self-) portrait in search of a paradise that is always over the horizon.

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[LA VIRREINA]
CENTRE
DE LA IMATGE

Ajuntament de
Barcelona



Lines of flight
Elena Oroz¹

Disorientations

In the opening sequence of *Africa 815*,² Pilar Monsell (Córdoba, 1979) asks her father to tell her his latest dream. Manuel describes a trip to an unrecognizable Barcelona, ravaged by war: a space that has become strange because there are no longer any familiar places via which to orient oneself (“I had no reference points or anything”). It is this spatial *disorientation* that finally casts doubts on his own identity (“I didn’t know who I was or what I was doing there”). His narrative is heard over juxtaposed images, a view of the sea on an especially cloudy day, in which the sky and water meet and become a diffuse and homogeneous grey mass. Only the wake of a ship slowly crossing the landscape, tracing a line, allows us to infer the existence of a horizon.

These shots of the sea, charged with symbolism, are repeated on several occasions—and denote melancholy, disappointment or longing. They are usually seen from the interior of the apartment in which Manuel, now retired, spends his holidays. Here his different memory aids accumulate (his carefully bound autobiography, old photographs and super 8 films) which the director brings together and activates in order to *transcribe*, through sober and precise staging, the singular biography of her father marked by his time in the ex-colony of Spanish Sahara when he was doing his military service. She also explores his open homosexuality and his confessional will that demonstrates a masculinity as vulnerable as it is atypical when it comes to dealing with feelings.

The second time that the maritime view appears in all its fullness coincides with a new chapter in Manuel’s life: the third volume of his memoirs (1976–1996). The image is now clear: there is a sunny day and the blue tones of the sky

¹ The author would like to thank Sonia García López for her orientations in tackling the present text and Pilar Monsell for her kind correspondence and willingness to resolve any doubts that arose during its writing.

² Production: Proxémica. Scriptwriter and director: Pilar Monsell. Digital, colour, 66 min, 2014.

and sea strongly contrast across the perfectly delimited line of the horizon. It is an image as (pre)visible as the life expectations of a Manuel who, nevertheless, confesses himself incapable of embodying *rigidity*. The preface to this volume, dedicated to his children as an apology, becomes a kind of meridian: "It is difficult to draw a straight line without a ruler, or when it is falling apart. When frustrations accumulate, our emotional state suffers, and it is almost impossible to regain a sense of balance." The spatial and geometrical metaphors that mark out his experiences do not seem casual: Manuel recognizes himself as a subject *twisted* by his inappropriate *orientation* (not exempt from the logic of power, as we shall see) towards *others*. As Sara Ahmed points out in her phenomenological approach to the queer subject, these types of directional symbols were common in explanatory accounts of homosexuality; specifically, when that condition was presented as a challenge to the family and to the patrilineal line.³ According to this author, moments of deviance from the family line (and that is how Manuel is perceived) become signs of the failure of the homosexual subject to *find his way*, due to the existence of a pressure (compulsory heterosexuality) that often adopts the language of happiness and care.⁴ Adopting the same language and the maritime image previously described, Manuel confesses that he married only to fulfil his desire to have children, since that was the only possible way he could do so under a dictatorship in which homosexuality was illegal.

From this *failure* on, his life would be marked by a contradictory (if not impossible) search for emotional and family stability through a sexual/affective imaginary world fed by a complex Orientalist imagination that was the fruit of his military experience in the Spanish Sahara. While the whole film is constructed around a lack and a desire (contrasting a retrospective and longed for testimony with photographs that evidence a focussed drive towards a *racialised*, eroticised,

³ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2006.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 50 and 66.

and feminized *other*) a single snapshot seems to condense these tensions. It is a family image, slightly out of focus, as the director points out, which Manuel looks at with nostalgia today, recalling what might have been his “ideal family”.⁵ In it, we see him and his three children, along with Ahmed, one of his numerous frustrated lovers from his Maghreb days.

Evidencing these *disorientations*, *Africa 815* presents us, first of all, with a male body whose experiences defy (while being frustrated by apparatuses of power and subjection) the national Franquist and hetero-patriarchal ideal. This was a social ideal that was initially configured as a despotic and *vertical* body (heterosexual, virile and family oriented). However, in the sixties, when Manuel’s recollections begin, that ideal was already on its last legs and, consequently, particularly anxious about changes in gender roles resulting from the process of modernization and opening up taking place in Spain.⁶

The approach to Manuel’s body is from a fragile perspective, as close as it is necessarily distanced. It is in this delicate enunciative position (that of a daughter articulating a *shared biography*) that the singularity and radical nature of this film can be found. The film moves us away from traditional historical documentaries about families, whether involving domestic ethnography⁷ or post-memory,⁸ to adopt the position of a *modest witness*, less self-reflexive, but equally aware of the cracks present in this memory based work. This is evidenced both by the hesitant approaches, camera in hand, of

⁵ Manuel’s testimony, at times self-indulgent, is clear when describing his yearnings under the yoke of the hetero-patriarchal, familial and colonial ideal of romantic love. His constant references to an “ideal love” denote a *domesticated* and therefore *feminized* projection of his lovers. Along with the aforementioned photograph, other evidence in the film notes these dynamics in which the “ideal” object is described in the following terms: “Quiet, a good cook, polite. Knew how to sew and iron and did it all to perfection.”

⁶ Tatjana Pavlovic, *Despotic Bodies and Transgressive Bodies. Spanish Culture from Francisco Franco to Jesús Franco*, New York, State University of New York Press, 2003.

⁷ Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

⁸ Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*, Cambridge (Mass.) and London, Harvard University Press, 1997.

Pilar to her father, as well as in her only personal digression in the film: “When memories also tell your history, your place in relation to those words also changes. Something modifies you, especially when you understand that you were born in the third volume of the book of memories of another.” This is a film which, like contemporary proposals, shares a commitment to recovering and revising our collective memory.⁹ However, it shifts both the enunciative position and its focus, from the moment it begins to illuminate aspects of the recent past that have been ignored or little discussed, such as the Spanish legacy in Colonial Africa.

Orientations

Manuel’s biographical account begins in 1964, when what he paradoxically calls his “liberation” took place: his incorporation into military service. This allowed him to fulfil three dreams: to leave Madrid, to visit Africa and to practice medicine professionally. It is in Laayoune, far from family ties (assimilated to boredom and sexual repression) where he will find his true orientation: in contact with “different men, of another race, another culture, and other ways of doing things.” Significantly, his story contains other memorial accounts of military men based in the ex-colony who, as Susan Martin-Márquez¹⁰ noted, problematize (and this is the most interesting for us here) the articulation of a stable Spanish national identity, in racial and gender terms, derived from the colonial project. Thus, Manuel describes the army as a homosocial space, in which discipline and camaraderie formed the substratum of legitimized homoerotic relations along

⁹ Without making claims of completeness, we would like to point out some contemporary non-fiction and related films (in terms of production, circulation and ways in which the past is represented) which, like *Africa 815*, not only trawl through the collective memory, but become exercises that reflect on the mechanisms of mediation with the past. *Unknown Soldiers* (Pere Vilà & Isaki Lacuesta, 2009), *Los materiales* [The Materials] (Los Hijos, Collective 2010), *El futuro* [The Future] (Luis López Carrasco, 2013), *Dime quién era Sanchicorrotta* [Tell me who Sanchicorrotta was] (Jorge Tur, 2013) or *El último vuelo* [The Last Flight] (Carolina Astudillo, 2014).

¹⁰ Susan Martin-Márquez, *Desorientaciones. El colonialismo español en África y la ‘performance’ de la identidad* [Disorientations: Spanish Colonialism in Africa and the Shaping of Identity], Barcelona, Bellaterra, 2011.

A F R I C A

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TP. 2:27-65-38

Spanish military service card showing posting, 1964
© Personal archives of Manuel M. Monsell Lobo



© Personal archives of Manuel M. Monsell Lobo, 1964



© Personal archives of Manuel M. Monsell Lobo, 1965



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dirección, fotografía y montaje PILAR MONSELL - textos y fotografías MANUEL MONSELL - producción ejecutiva RITA DESSINGER - diseño de sonido RAFAEL ÁLVAREZ y JONATHAN BARCH - sonido directo y op. cámara CLARA SANZ - telecinado super 8 y ep. cámara PAUL M. CANDELA - montaje de montaje GRILLO REYES - postproducción imagen FEDERICO DELPERO postproducción sonido JONATHAN BARCH - mezcla SONOMETRAJE - música PAU VIDAL - gráfica CRISTINA ULTREIA

una producción de

PROXÉTICA

con la colaboración de

SOTO MATEU

Cine Acción

<http://af815.wordpress.com>

© Design: Cristina Ultreia, 2014

with local bars that, in line with Orientalist fantasies, were particularly promiscuous spaces. The only rules seemed to be “discretion” (maintaining a stable relationship with friends in the ranks) and having no access to the Saharawi community’s settlement. Returning to Martin-Márquez’s remarks, we can infer how this regulation was basically designed to police relations between Spanish and Moroccan men. It was designed to minimize the threat of “inverting” the racial logic of the binomial superior/inferior, master/slave paradigm which can structure certain homosexual relations, more or less loosely permitted and legitimized, in militarized colonial contexts.¹¹ While Manuel points out these prescriptions, he also recounts multiple transgressions and fluid, if unequal, relationships between identical sexes but different races. His first Moroccan lover was Mohamed, whom he describes as belonging to both worlds (“He mixed military clothing with local dress codes”). Manuel himself, as shown in the photos accompanying this segment of the film, took on a somewhat mixed identity when he adopted Saharawi dress: a *djellaba* and a turban, garments he would continue wearing, after his military experience, on successive trips to the African continent. These same photographs have a clear homoerotic and Orientalist aesthetic, such as the one showing Manuel dressed as a doctor lying on a stretcher. There he becomes a conscious object of the gaze, denoting sexual predisposition. As already indicated, this same focussed drive marked his subsequent trips to the Maghreb, in the 1980s and 1990s, in search of new adventures full of desire for love and sexual conquest. This time his hunt is within the framework of global capitalism, so we see his fleeting and ill-favoured lovers are merely bodies in transit, monetized and marked by their race, who seek accommodation in a Europe that represents promise for them, and as Manuel points out, is the epitome of “modernity.”

Coda: horizons

In harmony with its opening, the film closes with a sea plane at sunset seen from a terrace on which Pilar and Manuel

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 221.

finally share a shot and lucubrate on the piece of land they can glimpse in the distance: speculating whether it is Africa (as some locals believe, or like to believe) or if it is a part of the Iberian peninsula. In a concise way, this scene captures the essence of Orientalism by representing it, according to Sara Ahmed, as a fantasy involving a lack of what is *not here*, which shapes desire and makes what *is there* become visible as a horizon, as a vanishing point that makes this lack visible.¹² Between two dreamlike images of a horizon as real as it is imaginary, *Africa 815* brings together valuable photographic and oral testimony (now expanded in its expository format) which, despite its blind spots and ellipsis, constitutes a courageous and resounding interpellation designed to deepen a national memory that was “impeded” by institutional policies, in that dimension of the past that Paul Ricoeur correctly described as “pathological-therapeutic”¹³ and which Gonzalo de Pedro points out in his critique of the film, opens the door to a reading in which economic, political and colonial exploitation is interwoven in a complex way with the sexual¹⁴ (and with sexuality and masculinity).

¹² Sara Ahmed, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

¹³ Paul Ricoeur, *La memoria, la historia, el olvido* [Memory, History and Forgetting], Madrid, Editorial Trotta, 2003.

¹⁴ Gonzalo de Pedro, “África 815 de Pilar Monsell. Lo que no está dicho”, in *Otros Cines Europa*, 2015, <http://www.otroscineseuropa.com/africa-815-de-pilar-monsell/> [accessed: 14 February 2017].

A film that led me to start reading
Pilar Monsell

He had given me the heavy volumes of his memoirs several years previously. He told me that he was still writing the following volume which would bring the story up to the present day. I brought the books with me to Barcelona, but the most I had done was glance through a few pages on the occasional Sunday afternoon.

Generally, my father's memoirs spent a long time firmly shut; remaining there, in plain sight, ensconced on one of my shelves. I seemed to have developed a strong resistance to actually reading them. It was like a barrier preventing me from getting any closer to his words; a barrier made of a mixture of shame and fear. On the one hand, I felt a deep respect for the frank, yet crude, way that my father had always talked about his intimacy. On the other hand, a far more powerful force imposed on me a feeling of extreme fragility whenever I approached those dense memoirs. It had already happened to me on other occasions: certain photographs from my childhood had all but destroyed me. It was no surprise then that I feared those books would expose me to some painful, forgotten and completely incomprehensible feelings.

Then, one spring morning, I remember it well; we were drinking coffee on a terrace close to the sea. I had gone down to Malaga to rest, with my father, in that white walled apartment where we used to spend our summers. It had then become a refuge, a place where it was always possible for me to withdraw from the world. At the time, I was finishing a short film I'd been asked to make that had led me to explore, seriously, and for the first time, the period of the Franco dictatorship. I felt the need to relate those readings of history with my own, the history of my family. I think that was why, on that trip, my initial questions about my father's childhood emerged. It was there that we began our conversations. Above all, it was there that I started to truly listen.

I tend to associate the beginnings of those dialogues with the age I was then. Nearly thirty, it was a time in which I started to take on a more mature relationship with my

family. In some way, I was reviving a family bond that I had rejected, voluntarily, for many years, without really knowing why. I guess that had been driven by a sense of distance and a desire to live my own life. I now found myself closer to my father again when he was already over seventy-five. His heart trouble began to reappear and I was constantly discovering more and more signs of his advanced age. The clarity with which I noted his growing vulnerability shook me.

I realized that the time left to us was not infinite, and I decided to finally confront those texts. And then, conscious of the exceptional nature of that moment, I started asking myself how I could read those books in the most attentive, most delicate and most careful way. I wondered how I could read them knowing that by doing so I would be straying into the most sensitive of areas for us.

And this is where the cinema comes in. I had already been seduced by the silver screen and fascinated by the whole process behind producing films, which demands total commitment to a particular universe for a concrete period of time (usually extensive and even elastic). I thought then that these were the ideal conditions under which to open those books and initiate, without any certainties or timetables, this one way journey towards the production of a film. I had found the best way to begin to read. It was only afterwards, among those pages, that the first images appeared.

The documentary *Africa 815* will be shown from 12:05 every day. It lasts 66 minutes and the times of the following showings will be approximately: 13:11, 14:17, 15:23, 16:29, 17:35 and 18:41.

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and public holidays, noon to 8 pm
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