

# HISTORY LESSONS

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## Content

It is possible to explain the history of colonialism using specific examples that serve to define the conditions of another particular situation. One of the features of these histories (or stories) of colonialism is that different colonial powers employed the same methods (expropriation, war and death) at different points in history. History does indeed repeat itself. In this regard, one good cultural artefact we can use to help us understand the contradictions of history is the film *Burn! (or Queimada)* (1969) by Gillo Pontecorvo. The ingredients of the film are constructed and fictionalised but are all based on real cases of domination, conquest, exploitation and resistance. The scene: a small island in the Caribbean called Queimada because in order to take it, the Portuguese had to set fire to it, devastating the land and annihilating the indigenous population, before resettling it with slaves from Africa.<sup>35</sup> The period: the mid nineteenth century. The protagonists: a shrewd, contradictory English mercenary, masterfully played by Marlon Brando, in the pay of the British Crown and later of a sugar-cane company, who provokes a series of revolts, successfully turning an illiterate native into the revolutionary leader of the guerrilla movement. The plot:

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<sup>35</sup> *Queimada* means "burnt" in Portuguese. In an attempt to make the film more commercially viable, the producers chose to translate the title, not as its equivalent *Burnt*, but as the absurd imperative *Burn!* reminiscent of the cry of "Burn, Baby, Burn" of the black ghetto riots, and the American strategy in Vietnam, and subsequently reused in the Trammis hit single *Disco Inferno*.

the succession of powers running the island, from Portuguese colony to independent state (after an uprising for national liberation) followed ultimately by the seizure of the island by the British.

Beyond the complexities of the plot, the film serves as an example, a case study, containing as it does a series of real historical situations: the expansion of colonialism and the close cooperation between the emerging trading companies and the imperial power, the exploitation of local goods by these companies, the role of the bourgeoisie, the birth of a political consciousness among the exploited, territorial disputes between colonial powers (in this case the Portuguese and the British, though they could just as well have been Dutch).

“We rule the country and its inhabitants, but the Portuguese rule all of our means”. This statement by a seventeenth-century Dutchman, taken from *Maurits Script* (2006) by Wendelien van Oldenborgh, points to conflicting interests over the occupation and exploitation of the new territories. It is also a reminder that the Dutch once occupied a large part of Brazil, from which they gained significant profits, before surrendering it to the Portuguese. No doubt the “means” to which he was referring included sugar cane, which—as in *Burn!*—was one of the chief objects of trade. The fact that political power was at the behest of economic control, which also established the means of social organisation in the emerging configuration of the new nations is nothing new. Van Oldenborgh's investigation, generically entitled *A Certain Brazilianness*, has some of the same exemplary character to be found in *Burn!* Both are examples of the only way of articulating the past historically, that is to say, dialectically, as

rescue, process and change, and as a result of the contradiction and heterogeneity of forces in continuous motion and conflict. It is important to draw a distinction between a history lesson and a historical lesson, though both can serve as models or archetypes for referring to the historical totality. What is important here are the still visible traces of those times in our own day. The nation-state was born out of the confrontation between the old kingdoms and the new territories, and became a breeding ground for nationalism as a system of beliefs rather than as a political ideology. It is there that what we refer to as “nationalism” today has its origins. In his book *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson accurately remarked how in an entirely unconscious way, the nineteenth century colonial state dialectically engendered the grammar of the nationalisms that ultimately rose up to combat them.<sup>36</sup> These echoes can still be heard today. A form of nationalism which originated in the Americas in the eighteenth and nineteenth century was adopted and adapted by popular movements and by imperialist powers in Europe, and by the anti-imperialist resistance in Asia and Africa. This growth in nationalist feeling is reflected in Van Oldenborgh's *No False Echoes* (2008), against the backdrop of the first radio connections between the Netherlands and the Dutch East Indies, where the Philips broadcasting company played an important role in preventing unwanted voices with nationalist leanings from being heard.

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<sup>36</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, New Edition, Verso, London/New York 2006.

*A Certain Brazilianness* and *No False Echoes* offer a study of the past and a more current resonance in the way the Netherlands relates to that past today, within the framework of the multi-ethnic make-up of its society. Where then should we place the wave of exclusive right-wing patriotism that is growing relentlessly in a country with such a long liberal tradition? Is there perhaps something atavistic about historical guilt?

While we can still talk of defining features from an idea of periphery, minority or a defence of “context”, speaking openly about a certain Brazilianness, a certain Irishness or a certain Basqueness, we are more hesitant to talk about a series of features suggesting a certain Dutchness, Britishness, Spanishness, Frenchness, and so on. The balance between the own and the other is always hanging in the air. But from an objective point of view, the conditions for the possibility of one set are just the same as those for the other set.

Another no less complicated dilemma was to be posed by the emergence of incipient nationalisms within the framework of modernism, especially on the American continent. This was reflected in Brazilian poet Oswald de Andrade's “Manifesto Antropófago” (*Cannibal Manifesto*), which served as a rallying cry for an entire cultural movement (painters, writers, poets, musicians) within Brazilian modernism from the 1920s to the 1950s. In a broader sense, modernism (now seen as an entire collection of vernacular versions, all of them modern) has repeatedly demonstrated, that the vindication of peripheral or marginal identities worth as much (or more) as those imposed from outside was preceded by exercises of self-affirmation anchored in the depths of tradition, the ancestral

and the mythical. Modernism (the assumption of the new) could not be brought about solely and exclusively from the “now”; rather, that “here”, that “today” was often the consequence of a historical process, of a long march stretching down to the present from some distant point in the past. And that is where a door was left open to nationalism.

This is what happened in different situations in both the Second and the Third World (as well as in specific places and regions in Europe); just as the colonial state produced nationalism, canonical or western modernism produced those other peripheral modernisms, one of whose particular focuses of interest lay in the European intellectual class's fascination with primitive art and primitivism.

This was the case with the Brazilian Modernist Movement, where this vernacular, mythical, component, half-way between reality and the fantasy projected by the conquerors, was actually the cannibalism of the indigenous Brazilian ancestors (the *Tapuyas*) who caused such trauma among the “civilised” Europeans—especially the Dutch—with the governor Johan Maurits (Count of Nassau-Siegen) at their head. But what distinguishes this appropriation of others is its sophisticated (somewhat *queerish*) anthropophagous metaphor, of devouring the enemy to make oneself stronger, where primitivism is seen as a sign of a critical swallowing of the other, with their culture, the modern and civilised.

## ***Form***

Wendelien van Oldenborgh uses film as an expanded and self-reflexive language, where the means of cinematographic production acts as a medium and metaphor for a type of cinema founded on the socio-historical processes she wants to depict. These same attempts at representation (the dialectic of history) have their own forms: historicity, cultural specificity and critical commitment. There are some well-known precedents in the Marxist tradition; for example, Walter Benjamin's positing of the quotability of history and the past. History is quotable, it is placed in quotation marks, and is only accessible to us in textual form.<sup>37</sup> Quotation marks *denote* distance, they bring something from afar. This use of quotation is consubstantial with Benjamin's vision of the concept of history.

*Maurits Script* (and to some extent *No False Echoes*) does not recreate a past by interpreting it after a process of exploration; instead it sets it in operation, in its performativity, using the old avant-garde technique of quotation and montage (so dear to Benjamin and his colleague Bertolt Brecht). These are old ways, too, of negotiating with history. But in addition, *Maurits Script* recalls Brecht's theatrical way of writing scripts using historical characters, such as Galileo Galilei—taken to an extreme in his experiment *Me-ti, Book of Changes* where the proverbial mode of Chinese philosophy offered him a chance to make moral and political commentaries on his own times, using Chinese pseudonyms for Stalin, Marx, Lenin and Rosa Luxembourgh, among others.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History" in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Volume 4, 1938-1940, eds. Howard Eiland, Michael W. Jennings, Belknap Press, Cambridge MA, 2006.

<sup>38</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Me-ti Buch den Wendungen*, Surkhamp Verlag, Frankfurt, 1965.

If we like, we can see—and read—*Maurits Script* and *Maurits Film* as *reenactments* of history (a term that has become so fashionable in the artistic discourse of our times) or as an exercise of contemporary historical materialism.

The quest to produce a cinematic reality cannot lose sight of its component parts; the technical array, the cameras, the set, the interiors and exteriors, the sound and so on. In three words: *mise-en-scène*. It is a practice that not only shows, but also highlights the gesture of showing. Set against a type of cinema that wipes out the traces is a cinema which reflects on the medium, all device.

Naturalist theatre is countered by epic theatre. In his film *One Plus One* (1968), Jean-Luc Godard introduced both the quotation and the device, filming the Rolling Stones rehearsing in their recording studio, with a circular movement of the camera, figures coming in and out of shot, mixed with readings by Black Panther imitators on how the white man stole the black man's soul by appropriating blues and jazz.

Quoting from history is equivalent to reading about history. And the way of showing the reading and the act of reception, in listening, serves to activate new interpretations and discussions on political history.