

## Portugal and the Future

Text by Jason E. Smith

“The class struggle in Portugal has from the very beginning been dominated by a direct confrontation between the revolutionary workers organised in autonomous assemblies and the Stalinist bureaucracy allied with a few defeated generals.” — Guy Debord<sup>1</sup>

The Portugal that experienced the so-called “Carnation Revolution” of 25 April 1974 was a historical anomaly. An imperial power, with large colonial holdings in southern Africa, the Portuguese metropole itself was characterised by extraordinary social and political backwardness, an outlier among European nations. The Portuguese economy was, by European and North American standards, primitive in every regard. Its largest sector by far was agrarian, divided between vast plantation-style latifundia in the south of the country, and small subsistence farming in the north. Portugal’s technologically impoverished agriculture, whose low yields were further exacerbated by a notoriously stingy soil, was complemented by an almost total absence of domestic manufactured goods, and correspondingly tiny consumer markets. The country’s infrastructure – its roads, ports and railways – was particularly rudimentary, and its property relations and arrangements almost feudal in character. The military, moving easily between regime and oligarchical families, maintained an outsized place in Portuguese society and everyday life.<sup>2</sup> That such a stagnant society, a small nation with a large fraction of its small population working elsewhere in Europe – their remittances a key source of income back home – would pretend to be capable of managing a vast overseas empire was paradoxical in the extreme.

If the military during the Salazar years had long played a predominant role in Portuguese society, this presence spiked dramatically in the years leading up to the “Carnation Revolution” of 25 April 1974. By 1973, the burden of the colonial empire and its counter-insurgency wars required lengthening military conscription to an unprecedented four years: some 142,000 troops were stationed in Portugal’s African outposts, an enormous number for a country of less than 10 million, while defence expenditures now consumed some half of the country’s paltry GDP.<sup>3</sup> Dissent welled up discreetly within the officer corps over the course of the early 1970s; in the months just before the dissolution of the Salazar regime altogether, it weathered an abortive military coup from within and the dynamiting, by a group calling itself the “Revolutionary Brigades”, of a military transport ship due to set out for the colonies.<sup>4</sup> A group of junior military officers calling itself the “Armed Forces Movement” (MFA: *Movimento das Forças Armadas*) was in position, by late April, to carry out a bloodless coup. The army was greeted in the streets with the famed carnations that gave the coup, or “revolution”, its name. Euphoria ensued as,

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<sup>1</sup> Guy Debord, “Refutation of All The Judgments, Pro or Con, Thus Far Rendered On The Film ‘The Society Of The Spectacle’”, *Complete Cinematic Works*, trans. Ken Knabb (Oakland: AK Press, 2003), p. 118.

<sup>2</sup> “The logic of economic archaism, brutal exploitation and omnipresent foreign capital is a political regime of permanent violence. Only a massive machinery of repression could keep the whole intolerable structure in place. The Salazar dictatorship [was] precisely this.” Perry Anderson, “Portugal and the End of Ultra-colonialism”, *New Left Review* 1/15 (May–June 1962), p. 88.

<sup>3</sup> “Portugal’s Colonies: Echoes of Another Century”, *New York Times*, 4 November 1973.

<sup>4</sup> In 1971, this same group blew up a NATO communications centre outside Lisbon, an event echoed in Douglas’s video.

overnight, the listless and violent Estado Novo regime was dropped, or so it seemed, into the historical void.

The coup of 25 April was successful due not simply to its blessing by wide swathes of the Portuguese people. It came off largely because it had the backing of a significant portion of the bourgeoisie, whose fortunes lagged under Salazarismo's archaic and irrational social relations and its unmanageable colonial possessions. For them, the "revolution" of April was resolutely a revolution for a properly Portuguese modernity: a modernisation and rationalisation of Portuguese capitalism and society. In the case of Portugal in particular, this meant finally following the lead of the French and British in the formal relinquishment of their imperial holdings. But for many in Western Europe, in the twilight of the *Trente Glorieuses* of European post-war economic expansion, a modernized capitalism entailed an inclination towards a state-managed capitalist economy: one guaranteeing high wages and full employment, with production and consumption meticulously coordinated and planned, rationally and not through the crisisprone mechanisms of the markets, with not a little help from recent innovations in cybernetics and mainframe computing. The progressive bourgeoisie of these years dreamed not of seeking out new exploitable labour pools, stagnant profit-taking in the financial sector, or a frontal attack on the organised working class, such as would become the norm even by the late 1970s, after the neoliberal turn. *Modernity* meant, for much of the Portuguese military and ruling class, throwing off the irrationality and anachronism of the feudal arrangements of their country's stagnant economy, in favour of a dynamic, state-directed, socialist plenty.

Schematising to the extreme, we can say that the coup of 25 April was the opening move in a complex revolutionary process that, after the sudden collapse of Salazarismo, unfolded over more than a year and a half and in two distinct stages. Over the first eleven months of this sequence, the world witnessed a relatively classical "bourgeois" revolution undertaken primarily by these progressive bourgeoisies and by their military stand-ins or allies in the MFA, both converging against a backward, corporatist, feudal society and a more or less fascist old-regime elite. This opening phase of the revolutionary process also witnessed other social forces wading into the fray, not least in a wave of strikes some weeks after the April coup, but also in the form of the newly legalised Portuguese Communist Party (PCP), which immediately assumed key ministerial duties in a series of national-unity governments formed around the ex-Salazar confidant General (and now President) Spínola.<sup>5</sup> For the first eleven months of this post-fascist Portugal, the Communist Party played a supporting role in a government whose core source of legitimacy was a nominally apolitical alliance between the MFA and the "people". This first phase of the revolution came to a predictable end with not one but two separate coup attempts on the part of Spínola, the first in September 1974, and then a second and last attempt in March 1975.

The failure of this second, unsuccessful coup attempt launched the "revolution within the revolution", or the properly proletarian phase of the historical events unfolding in Portugal. This second phase was initially spearheaded by an empowered Communist Party that, with the aid of PCP-aligned factions

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<sup>5</sup> This "progressive" bourgeoisie was ample enough to include figures such as the eventual president of the First Provisional Government, the monocle General António de Spínola, a one time confidant of Salazar who, in 1973, called for a moderate version of this modernisation. In a book significantly titled *Portugal e o futuro* (Portugal and the Future), he proposed among other reforms a formal relinquishment of the colonies of the southern cone of Africa, offering nominal and political independence in exchange for an advantageous economic dependence and "partnership".

within the broader Armed Forces Movement, made its move on state power, increasingly dominating the succession of provisional governments that came and went between March and August of that year. By June 1975, the Communist Party had its hand on almost all levers of classical power, be they those of the state, the media, trade unions, or the military. It was precisely at this cresting of its authority across Portuguese society that another social force arose, however, to contest this hegemony, this time from the Party's left: a powerful grassroots movement rooted in workplaces in industry and the countryside, making its presence felt in a wave of occupations, of factories, farms, housing, and, indeed, entire neighbourhoods and even regions (particularly that of Alentejo). These movements operated largely out of the control of the dominant political parties and groupings, if sometimes with their distant approbation or tolerance; the organs of power they spontaneously created were clearly distinct from classical forms of worker power characteristic of the international workers' movement (unions, parties).

After June 1975, a very peculiar dynamic took shape. Within the social and geographic bases of the left and far left, rivalry, tension and even conflict emerged between the Communist Party and its military allies and this broad-based proletarian movement, which bucked beneath the pressure of the PCP and its bureaucratic direction, opposing a vision of worker self-management to the nationalisations and trade union-based vision deployed by the PCP. Much of the rest of the country was opposed to this "red" core region, but in particular the north, whose smallholding peasantry remained outside the dynamics of the Lisbon- and Alentejo-anchored upheaval—peasants who desperately clung to their tiny, inherited, plots of unproductive soil, and who remained in the thrall and under the thumb of the Catholic Church, long a partner with Salazar in the archaic forms of underdevelopment prevalent in Portuguese life. The substance of Portuguese society had become extremely volatile, with the prospect of the Communist Party seizing full power perceived as a threat by almost all of the actors involved. And not only the entrenched right in the north or the occupations movement to its far left: another key actor in the situation, the United States, suddenly found itself confronted with the possibility of (or so it feared) a Soviet beachhead at the very mouth of the Mediterranean. NATO lurked, menacingly, just offshore; contingency plans for the capture of the Portuguese Azores were made; the CIA sprang into action, funding the "centrist" parties of the right and left. A wave of forest fires struck the countryside. From Franco's Spain, old-regime elites plotted with recently arrived *retornados* from the colonies, while Communist Party headquarters were attacked across the country. Bombings were carried out by the extreme right and left. Plots abounded on all sides.

"What do I care?

I'm just a starving bomb maker. I have no future.

I disdain the future but I am a force."

— The Professor

Stan Douglas's *The Secret Agent* is a six-channel video installation re-creating Portugal's "Hot Summer" of 1975, a little over one year into the ongoing revolutionary process opened by the MFA coup of April 1974. It was shot in March 2015 on location in Lisbon, with British and Portuguese actors, almost exactly forty years after the events described in the film are meant to have happened.<sup>6</sup> The

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<sup>6</sup> Douglas originally conceived and developed *The Secret Agent* in 2008.

action is set within the shadowy, clandestine margin of the Portuguese mass movement, largely in the back alleys and bars of Lisbon. Everything takes place at a remove from the great drama of history playing itself out in the squares, the factories, the countryside and the government ministries. At its centre is a small cinema managed by the central character of the video, Verloc, and his wife, Winnie. This theatre, as the posters we see in the lobby attest, plays largely art house fare from the rest of Europe, often shading into “soft” pornography: *I am Curious (Yellow)*, *Last Tango in Paris*, *The Mother and the Whore*. At one key point early in the film, we see one of Verloc’s gang, Michaelis, alone in the theatre watching Bertolucci’s film, tears running down his face. Moments later, we find ourselves in the projection booth where the conspiratorial cohort meet. On water-stained ceiling tiles we now see the film itself project, the images inverted, barely legible. In the meantime, Michaelis justifies to his contemptuous comrades his emotional response to the film: “Sorry – the film is beautiful. Paul’s loss reminds me of my own. It is a loss we will all share.” Though Michaelis identifies his loss with that of Marlon Brando’s character Paul (whose wife has committed suicide), we do not know what this suicide “reminds him of”, nor why he claims this loss is one from which we all suffer, and share. Who, moreover, is this “we” he speaks of? Those in the room with him? The masses mobilised by the Portuguese revolutionary movement? Or indeed those of us in the room with *The Secret Agent*, watching a six-channel video installation forty years after the events described in the video are said to have occurred?

A post-1968 Parisian motif more generally is maintained through the film, not only through the screening of *Last Tango in Paris* or the poster for Jean Eustache’s *The Mother and the Whore* (from 1973, and often considered the film that best captures the mood of the *après-mai*); that is, by means of a cinematic mediation. It is also evident in the historical ties two key characters have with those events: Verloc, the anarchist double agent who uses the cinema as his cover, as well as Ossipon, a French Maoist and propagandist who was out of the country during the events of May 1968 and so finds himself in Lisbon seven years later, to recapture the “loss” he experienced seven years prior: his missed rendezvous with history. Both Bertolucci’s and Eustache’s films examine the sexual or libidinal fallout of the post-1968 period in Paris and elsewhere in France, exploring the way the largest general strike in the history of modern Europe mutated into forms of micropolitical experimentation, with sexual identities and practices the key target or terrain. In his extraordinary firsthand account and analysis of the revolution in Portugal from a far-left perspective, the Irish council communist Phil Mailer noted that one of the first measures taken by the MFA in 1974 was the disarming of the strict censorship boards maintained by the regime. Suddenly the country was awash in pornography. After the MFA “abolished the censorship boards,” he writes, “pornography flooded the marketplace, competing for space on the newsstands alongside the political newspapers. Together, they were everywhere.”<sup>7</sup> This cheek-by-jowl juxtaposition of politics and pornography takes a more synthetic and highbrow turn in Douglas’s video, with Verloc’s cinema doubling as a bookstore with Bataille’s *L’Érotisme* prominently displayed next to Fanon, and Ossipon’s Maoist leaflets no doubt shuffled in among these titles.

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<sup>7</sup> Phil Mailer, *Portugal: The Impossible Revolution?* (Oakland: PM Press, 2012), p. 36. Similar accounts abound. Brian Parkin, British Trotskyist: “But next along the stall is a selection of catholic pamphlets (a comrade tells me that most are on the church’s teachings on birth control) as well as rosaries, crucifixes and saints cards and candles, next to which is the most lurid display of the most explicit pornography imaginable. Talk about uneven and combined development!” <http://rs21.org.uk/2014/05/03/memoirs-of-a-revolution-portugal-1974/>

Douglas's *The Secret Agent* is, of course, based on the 1907 novel of the same name by Joseph Conrad. Same cast of characters, with their mysterious foreign names, and same sequence of events, with adjustments made for the peculiarities of the new historical body onto which this story has been grafted. Much of the dialogue is drawn directly from Conrad's original. Though this precedent is nowhere openly evoked in Douglas's appropriation of Conrad's work, lurking throughout *The Secret Agent* is an earlier adaptation of the novel: Alfred Hitchcock's 1936 film *Sabotage*. This mediation is made clear by Douglas's treatment of one particular aspect of Conrad's narrative: his transformation of Verloc's "cover", in the novel a tawdry backstreet dispensary of soft pornography ("photographs of more or less undressed dancing girls", "a few books, with titles hinting at impropriety"<sup>8</sup>) into a movie theatre, making Verloc operate out of the cinema. The cinema: a medium and a historical form that the six-channel video we are surrounded by both takes part in and is distanced from, as a historical relic, one whose twilight can be dated in hindsight to around the "time" depicted in the video (the mid-1970s). This staging is particularly important for understanding the historical operation performed, or proposed, by Douglas. The time that lapsed between the anarchist 1880s and the 1907 publication of Conrad's novel not only witnesses a mutation in the figure of anarchism and its place in the historical activity of the proletariat, it also occasions the invention of the cinema itself: a technology, set of conventions, and artistic form that would arguably, in aesthetic terms, dominate the century to come. The twentieth century is not only the short century of Soviet power, as proposed famously by Eric Hobsbawm's *Age of Extremes*, it is equally the century of cinema, one originating in the transformations of media technology of the 1890s (Edison's kinetoscope is invented the same year, 1894, as the Greenwich Observatory is bombed, the "real" event on which Conrad's novel is based), and whose outer limit can most likely be dated by the widespread use of video, and in the field of art, the spatialisation of cinematic projection in the form of video installation. When in *The Secret Agent* Michaelis is seen weeping in a backstreet movie theatre, and lamenting an unidentified loss, it can be seen, with forty years' hindsight, to represent the fading of the cinema itself as a dominant cultural or artistic form: the end, in fact, of the short century of cinema.

Douglas's intervention takes on all of its significance with a second alteration of Conrad's narrative, this time a change in the nature of the target to be attacked with The Professor's imperfect bomb. In the novel, Mr Vladimir, in pressing Verloc to carry out a bombing that would "accentuate the unrest" roiling British society, transforming this unrest into open war, and bringing about a violent repression on the part of the too-tolerant British state, proposes London's Greenwich Observatory for what it represents: *science*. "Science", in the age of late nineteenth-century bourgeois society, is "the sacrosanct fetish of to-day," Vladimir declaims; the bourgeoisie as a class has as its core ideological commitment, the belief "that in some mysterious way science is at the source of their material prosperity".<sup>9</sup> In Douglas's version, Verloc, the anarchist veteran of the French May 1968, is on the payroll of the US government and answers to Vladimir, whose status as an "embassy official" is cover for his work in the American secret services. It was widely assumed throughout the Portuguese revolution that the CIA played an active role, often clandestinely supporting both old-regime elements and the moderate, "progressive" wing of the democratising forces at work in Portugal, the Socialist Party led by Mario Soares.<sup>10</sup> If in the

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<sup>8</sup> Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent* (New York: Knopf, 1992), p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Conrad, *The Secret Agent*, pp. 25, 27.

<sup>10</sup> Phil Mailer recounts that a massive demonstration passed by the PS headquarters shouting "Out with the CIA, Out with NATO" (*Portugal: The Impossible Revolution?*, p. 75).

historical unfolding of the Portuguese mass movement, the CIA and NATO exerted for the most part indirect pressure on events – offering financial support to certain factions, or conducting “war games” off the coast of Lisbon, an implicit threat of invasion should the transition veer too far off course – Douglas has Verloc, under pressure from his handler, intervene dramatically in the delicate situation taking shape that “Hot Summer”: one more bombing in a wave of attacks, this time meant to tip the balance in favour of reaction and the return to order. After Verloc unimaginatively proposes going after “embassies”, Vladimir contemptuously waves away this idea:

Don't be facetious, Mr Verloc. You could blow up every embassy in Lisbon without influencing the public one bit. The only thing the Portuguese care about now is the future. They never want to be a backward country again. You anarchists hate the status quo and since bombs are your means of expression why not bomb modernity itself? What do you think about an assault on communication?

In Douglas's version of *The Secret Agent*, the Greenwich Observatory and its embodiment of science – with an implicit equation between the study of the movements of the heavens, and the “dismal science” of political economy, that bourgeois science par excellence – is replaced by the submarine cables carrying “communications” (in 1975: voices, writing; now: images). It is, we are led to speculate, this very material thing, these wires, these cables, that will become the new sacrosanct fetish of the Portuguese bourgeoisie: the “source”, that is, of “their material prosperity”. The future of Portugal is also that of the world, a future in which power – that is, the capacity to act in the now, to be modern – is located not in the old institutional husks of state power (the embassy), but in the webs of communication stitching together the globe: the virtual networks and the hardwiring through which value is pumped without cease.

Douglas's *The Secret Agent* is above all a film about modernity. It is “about” modernity, though, in a very special way: in the story, modernity is not merely evoked, it is targeted for attack. Significantly, it is not struck, it remains intact; the agent involved, or rather his surrogate, is blown to bits in the attempt. What could modernity have meant at the time; that is, the time *in* the film, the time of the Portuguese revolution? It meant quite simply what the revolution set out to achieve, or rather, what it ended up bringing about: the modernisation of Portugal. Contemporary witnesses considered the events that unfolded in Portugal – especially the wave of factory, farm and housing occupations, outside the framework of the classical “left” parties – to be among the most radical ever seen in the history of the workers' movement. No less a witness than Guy Debord, not one given to optimistic overinflation of events, declared in a letter to some Portuguese friends that “it is clear that up to this point the modern proletariat has never gone so far”.<sup>11</sup> The intensity and inventiveness of these struggles, however, ended up being a historical catalyst of a very special sort: a modernising development programme, bringing Portugal into the capitalist present. From the perspective of our present, to watch *The Secret Agent* is to measure the distance between the volatility of the time depicted – its modernising dynamism, its opening onto an indeterminate future – and the present of the crisis, our crisis. Ours is a present for which the modernity exhibited in 1975, as a historical drive or impulse, is now a kind of antiquity, now bathed in the glow of the “glorious” post-war period. Portugal arrived late to that moment of modernity, at its conclusion. Where revolutionaries across the Continent saw in the successes of the

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<sup>11</sup> See his letter dated 24 February 1975 in Guy Debord, *Correspondance*, Volume 5 (Paris: Fayard, 2005), p. 24.

Portuguese mass movement the future of Europe, a shot off the historical bow, its “ongoing revolutionary process” would turn out to be the final, punctuating coda to a twentieth century defined by modernising processes masquerading as revolutionary ones.

That the first screening of Douglas’s video will mark the fortieth anniversary of the “Hot Summer” it depicts makes *The Secret Agent* at once a commemoration and critical commentary on those events. It is, just as importantly, an oblique meditation on what has transpired in the forty years since the conclusion of the eighteen-month sequence in November 1975, with the failure of a Communist Party-inspired coup attempt, and the eventual triumph of Mario Soares’s Socialist Party in the April 1976 elections.<sup>12</sup> In the lapse of the intervening four decades, much of what has taken place in Portugal is traceable to the transformative events of those short eighteen months. After the scripting of a new constitution and the establishment of a pattern of parliamentary “alternation” between centre-left and -right parties, and with the final disengagement from its African entanglements, a “modern” Portugal found itself brought into the bosom of the European market and indeed, eventually, the European Union. The time of the video’s first screening is the future envisioned variously by all of the actors of the revolution, everyone from Spínola to the far-left actors of the period, both in and outside the Armed Forces Movement. It is, however, the onset of the global economic crisis of 2008 – echoing in many ways a similar global crisis that occurred 1973–75, the very time of the Carnation Revolution – that shapes the present through which a contemporary viewer sees the video. Within the European Union, this crisis most dramatically affected its outer fringes, the so-called “PIIGS”, an acronym that includes Portugal as its first letter (Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece, Spain). In Portugal, the crisis ushered in an era of stagnation and disorientation, with high rates of unemployment, and a fruitless and cruel austerity programme administered by a centre-right coalition. Unlike its peer countries among the “PIIGS”, such as Spain and Greece, these conditions did not produce a dynamic anti-austerity movement along the lines of the global movement of the squares, nor has a leftist or left-populist political formation, such as Syriza or Podemos in Greece and Spain respectively, emerged outside of the moribund post-fascist “alternation”, each pole of which competes to administer the belt-tightening dictated by Portugal’s European creditors. The question of the ultimate success or failure of the Carnation Revolution therefore haunts the Portuguese present, and Douglas’s *The Secret Agent*. The future of Portugal meant economic and political modernisation, to be sure. But it also meant, with the dawn of the crisis, a future of no future, of directionless drift, a horizon of technocratically managed austerity, running up against little to no organized mass opposition.<sup>13</sup> In this way, we can encounter *The Secret Agent* with perhaps the same response as Michaelis, recognising ourselves in the future he foresees:

“Sorry – the film is beautiful. Paul’s loss reminds me of my own. It is a loss we will all share.”

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<sup>12</sup> Since the 1976 elections, the Socialist Party (PS) has largely alternated places with its centre-right “opposition”, the so-called “Social Democratic” Party (PPD/PSD), a party in turn often allied with the Christian Democrats (CDS).

<sup>13</sup> This is not to say that there was no anti-austerity movement in Portugal, only that it was much more marginal than those found in Spain and Greece, and that it failed to give birth to new, mass political parties. The contrast with Spain is most telling. *The Economist*, in a recent article, speaks of “Austerity without anger” to describe the political mood in Portugal: <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21653653-perhaps-surprisingly-anti-austerity-and-populist-parties-are-not-doing-well-austerity-without>