

Capua corrupted Hannibal: A Few Notes on Stan Douglas' *The Secret Agent*¹

Text by Séamus Kealy

I have no doubt, however, that there had been moments during the writing of the book when I was an extreme revolutionist ... I was simply attending to my business. In the matter of all my books, I have always attended to my business. I have attended to it with complete self-surrender.

Joseph Conrad, Author's Note, *The Secret Agent*, 1920²

Stan Douglas is often interested in neglected moments in history where events might have turned one way or another. Portugal in 1975 is one such moment, where after the Carnation Revolution, political reversals and turmoil shook the country. The United States was close to the Portuguese dictatorship that was the object of the revolution, and now found itself unsettled by the possible directions that the country might take. Already, Cold War tensions and colonial war had been playing out in Portugal's colonies Angola, Mozambique and Guinea.

This is the backdrop to Stan Douglas' version of *The Secret Agent*, a story first written in 1907 by Joseph Conrad, and recast throughout the 20th Century in different film, theatre and television adaptations.³ The artist's research for the photo series *Disco Angola* (2012) and the film *Luanda Kinshasa* (2013), that each referenced the liberation of Angola and its aftermath, also informs this work.⁴

This narrative of the colonies and their ongoing struggle is absent from *The Secret Agent*. This absence and other deliberate narrative gaps, as well as apparent lacks in the characters and their characterizations, set a number of determinative factors for the film and its presentation. Presented on six screens often depicting different sequences simultaneously, we witness fragmentation and re-suturing of circumstances between a re-told and re-imagined fiction (based loosely on real events), an actual historical context, and our own present, where our bodies are inserted between conversations and narratives.

Everything seems to have a pre-set outcome, from the stopped clock in the cinema suggesting a suspension of time, to the looped narrative itself emphasizing pre-determination. Moreover, key characters from the book are absent. While Michaelis, a central character in the plot, makes a brief appearance in the film, Stevie, who ends up blown to bits, never appears.⁵ Verloc, always the bumbling amateur with some never-evident talent for conspiracy, takes on the appearance of a secret agent, but is ultimately useless and pathetic. He is constantly called "lazy" by the American agent. The other characters exhibit their own neuroses. Yundt and Ossipon are not just bad anarchists; they are fake, even parasitic. "Everybody is mediocre," declares the Professor in the book.

We watch the comic posturing, ongoing ineptitude, and ultimate failure of revolutionaries not despite but seemingly because of their ideological subjectivities. As opposed to Conrad's "self-surrender" ostensibly engulfed in his "business," each character in Stan Douglas' version is corruptible and cliché while determined to continue in these identity-narratives. As with much of Douglas' work, slippage of meaning and doubt are placed within and disrupt seemingly more coherent, grand narratives. Likewise,

distrust for constructions of political subjectivity emerges, where imagined and real histories are intermingled and begin to reflect one another.

One history that determined Conrad's *The Secret Agent* may be interesting to consider. The character Michaelis was based by Conrad on the Fenian, one-armed revolutionary Michael Davitt who died the year before the novel's publishing.⁶ Davitt fought for the Irish revolutionary cause throughout his life, and was elected as an MP while imprisoned (but refused the position by the state). He later lectured internationally on humanitarianism, agitated for the Boer cause, wrote and edited extensively, and was admired by Ghandi, while often misunderstood in post-war Ireland and Great Britain. Davitt advocated that violence was self-defeating and that underground, armed conspiracy merely invited infiltration by state agents as well as back-stabbing informants.⁷ This anti-colonial activist and thinker is transformed by Conrad into an over-weight idealist serving probation, who struggles to formulate his political theories, and who, like Stevie, is no match for the dark forces about him.

In Douglas' version, nobody is competent enough to play a role for the political future. They merely attend to their business like somnambulists. It is no coincidence that Verloc gives away his networks by talking in his sleep. These characterizations approach the comic where ideological discourses, or any conversations, are spoken mechanically. The American agent only furthers the fog of uncertainty with his jingoist meddling. The Professor gloats within his personalized Nietzscheanism, believing himself free by virtue of his own dark logic and ever-potential self-annihilation, but he is more a barfly than a revolutionary.⁸ It is not only the anarchists who lack Conrad's so-called "self-surrender," it is the police and officials as well. Everyone seems uncommitted to their situation, clueless to the unravelling political currencies, and on the brink of self-flight. Only one character breaks this tendency: Winnie interrupts the political paralysis by killing her husband, Verloc.

During the film's denouement, a shot of the cinema audience appears in the overall sequence, likely watching *Last Tango in Paris*. They stare at the western dream-narrative, entranced in a disavowal of their condition, engorged instead in the bourgeois existentialism recently forbidden to them under the dictatorship.⁹ They forget their tangled, colonial situation and its consequences, and blank out their unstable present. "Ah yes. The crowd," says the Nietzschean Professor, outside the cinema, "... filthy countless multitude. Unconscious. Blind."¹⁰ His words conclude the circumstances that then recommence and repeat themselves.

¹ Taken from Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent*. Edited and with an introduction by Martin Seymour-Smith. (Penguin Books: Middlesex: 1984), p. 96. This term means that luxury ruins everyone. After Hannibal was victorious against the Romans, he rested within luxurious Capua, and thereafter met defeat.

² Ibid. p. 42.

³ *The Secret Agent*, written by Joseph Conrad in 1907, has had many variations since then, including different film versions, a depoliticized film by Alfred Hitchcock in 1936, entitled *Sabotage* (and not to be confused with his 1930 film *The Secret Agent*, based on a Somerset Maugham story), and the unsuccessful 1996 film directed by Christopher Hampton, and starring Bob Hoskins. Television versions include a 1992 BBC series, and another upcoming BBC TV series.

⁴ Stan Douglas wrote *The Secret Agent* in 2008 but was unable to produce it until 2015. *Disco Angola* and *Luanda Kinshasa* were "a way of making use of all the research I had done at a time."

⁵ "Stevie's not there because he's invisible to everyone but Winnie—and maybe it is he, not Verloc, who is the Secret Agent. Or not. The secret agent of this piece might turn out to be something altogether different (not a person at all) but it is definitely not Verloc." From an email conversation with Stan Douglas, July 2015.

⁶ See the introduction to *The Secret Agent* by Martin Seymour-Smith, p. 18.

⁷ See T.W. Moody, *Davitt and the Irish Revolution*, (Oxford University Press, 1984).

⁸ "The Professor is more of a Nietzschean than a nihilist. My thought was that he felt as superior to 'the crowd' as members of the Fascist regime who kept the bulk of the population in an uneducated agrarian condition did. But you had everything in Portugal in 1975, all the way left all the way right and everything in between. The unique thing in the Carnation Revolution, though, was the rural collectivization of farms by farmers but my characters have no clue about that." From an email conversation with Stan Douglas, July 2015.

⁹ "One of the first things the MFA (Armed Forces Movement) did after the Revolution was to lift restrictions on freedom of speech—i.e. pornography—and of course European art house cinemas were awash with the stuff in the 1970s. I saw a documentary about the Revolution where an elderly woman standing line to see *Last Tango in Paris* was asked if she knew what the film was about. No, she answered. Then why are you going to see it? Because it was banned and I want to see what they didn't want me to see. *Last Tango* was a huge hit after the Revolution." From an email conversation with Stan Douglas, July 2015.

¹⁰ His final words are "Let them," referring to the idea of the mass tearing him to pieces, as suggested by Inspector Heat. It appears appropriate that the Nietzschean professor has the last word (and a close-up) before the narratives re-starts.