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MAPS - PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS: UMA CARTOGRAFIA PÓS-COLONIAL | MAPS - EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES: A POSTCOLONIAL CARTOGRAPHY

Saturday, 13 November 2021

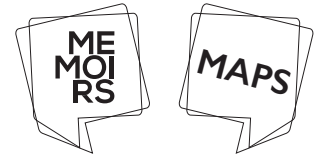


From the hotel window, Rita watches the 'burial' by the pool. Image from the movie *Yvonne Kane* (2015)  
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## GHOST POOLS: MEMORY, THE END

Paulo de Medeiros

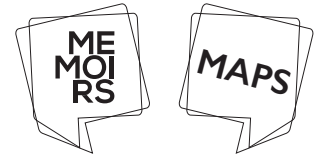
In a certain sense, it is always too late to talk about the end. Once we do so, more often than not, it has already come by, played itself out, and ushered in something else that might appear new but usually is rather archaic. How can we avoid being distracted into believing the archaic really is what we would imagine as the future? Probably only by being contemporary in an Agambian sense, can one truly see the end before it vanishes. As the *Memoirs* project draws close to its official closure, a brief reflection on memory and end, on memory at the end, and as the end, might help in terms of envisaging what is left to do. With that in mind I want to reflect on a scene at the end of Margarida Cardoso's *Yvonne Kane* (2014). Indeed, that scene can also be seen as the film's very end, at the same time that it metonymically stands in for the film in its totality. Understanding the end as the whole would be paradoxical, were it not for the fact that the film itself is a profound meditation on the sense of an ending. The end of an era but also, in a certain sense, the end of memory.



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To avoid any misunderstandings let me be clear: when referring to *Yvone Kane* as a reflection on the end of memory I want to steer clear of any Hegelian ‘end of history’ tones and even more so with respect to Fukuyama’s own version of the same as the final end of ideology. For one, we all have had our share of teleological projects, manifest destinies, civilizational burdens, and exceptionalisms of all kinds. Whatever critique of ideology the film engages with it is not carried from some kind of distant, rarefied, vantage point; even though the film frames its representation of ideology through a complex filter, it remains not just personal and raw, but more like a wound. Ideology on the one hand, is what gives rise to the various betrayals in the film, starting with the party’s betrayal, and execution, of Yvone Kane. That kind of ideology did not end, it simply metamorphosed itself into its apparent opposite, the rampant neoliberal order easily sliding over the previous appropriation, co-optation, and misuse of Marxian concepts that hardly masked deep seated and archaic hierarchies and intensely puritan moralities. As such, *Yvone Kane* does not stage the end of ideology but rather the defeat of a certain ideology, that viewed emancipation as a real possibility, coupled with a long overdue expanded notion of belonging. It is the end of that particular utopia that *Yvone Kane* mourns and its melancholia should never be mistaken for a nostalgia it deeply rejects.

The closing scene of *Yvone Kane* has movement; yet it also appears as static, as if it were a photograph, a moment in time frozen forever, and as such itself an intimation of death as Susan Sontag (1973-1977) and Roland Barthes (1980) aptly remarked. The motion that there is in that scene – leaving aside the rolling of the sea waves in the background contrasting with the stillness of the woman, Rita (Beatriz Batarda), who watches from the window – is that of several black workers in the process of filling in the hotel’s swimming pool. An apparently paradoxical image then, that is highly significant: as a sort of burial, it functions as an index of the various forms of loss that can never be undone, whose haunting can never cease: as Fredric Jameson put it, ‘History is what hurts’ [1]. The swimming pool of that old colonial hotel – Margarida Cardoso identifies it as the ‘Hotel Chongoene, in the Xai Xai, to the North of Maputo’ [2] – once a symbol of luxury and leisure has become one of death, as it is rumoured to have been the scene of executions in the period following independence. This in the film’s narrative, which, of course, is a fiction that intentionally blurs the distinction between fact and fiction throughout. Much can be said, and much has been said, on this. Here, I only want to remark on the fact that as much as art imitates life, life also imitates art and as such it is perhaps no surprise to find [a blog entry ‘documenting’ a visit to the hotel ruins by a couple of South African tourists, complete with reference to the pool’s ghosts](#). This is only worth mentioning because what appears at first to be a whimsical



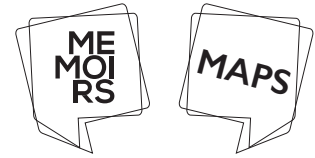
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extension of the film's logic, a kind of ironical play on the film's own ironical deployment of a young South African couple as unwitting hoteliers who bought the ruins in ignorance of the place's recent bloody history, is actually its perfect emptying of meaning. Viewing the ruins' supposed site of memory as yet another tourist attraction enacts its own forgetting, the banality of its dismissal of History yet a further reification of life.

When asked specifically about the swimming pool and the abandoned hotel in a session held at the Institute of Modern Languages Research at the School of Advanced Studies, University of London on 14 January 2016, [Margarida Cardoso mentioned](#) a photograph that had been important to her already since her work for her previous film, *A Costa dos Murmúrios* (2004). It is a photograph, taken by the critically acclaimed photographer Sophie Ristelhueber of a swimming pool in total ruin, part of a collection included in her 1984 book *Beyrouth: Photographes* (<https://sophie-ristelhueber.format.com/beyrouth#1>). As Margarida Cardoso also explains, Ristelhueber's work covers much of the same ground, concerned as it is with territory, the scars left on both people and the earth, and the aftermath of disaster. The notion of aftermath is especially relevant here as the film as a whole already presents us with the aftermath not just of colonialism but also of the various forms of violence related to it, whether properly colonial or post-colonial. Seen as a time, the notion of aftermath implies a temporality beholden to catastrophe. Seen as space, the aftermath implies ruins, desolation, and loss. The loss in *Yvone Kane* is multiple and unfolding, be it the death of Rita's daughter which functions as a kind of catalyst for the film as it forms the origin of Rita's quest to find the truth about Yvone Kane, or rather the various ways in which innocence is repeatedly lost throughout the film.

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The image of the swimming pool at the end of *Yvone Kane* could also be termed a kind of aftermath, as it functions as if it were a 'late photograph' as conceptualised by David Company.<sup>[3]</sup> 'Late photographs' can represent the medium's response to the ubiquity of video, answering back to the supposed immediacy and fidelity of the moving image. In that they can also become utterly banal. In his conclusion, David Company voiced an important concern: "If the banal matter-of-factness of the late photograph can fill us with a sense of the sublime, it is imperative that we think through why this might be. There is a fine line between the banal and the sublime, and it is political. If an experience of the contemporary sublime derives from our being caught in a geo-political circumstance beyond our comprehension, then it is a politically reified as much as an aesthetically rarefied one". Not so with either the work of Sophie Ristelhueber or Margarida Cardoso. Those ghost and ghostly swimming pools are anything from banal.



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If anything, they are a trace of the past, their broken materiality itself standing in for the wounded lives of those to whom they represent not just the passing of time but the very passing of an era, the disappearance of their lives' framework.

Margarida Cardoso is one of the most accomplished contemporary directors working in Portugal – or anywhere else in the world, for that matter. *Yvone Kane* is a stunning film in its formal aspects, such as the constant framing of the characters through various objects and reflections, the use of a wide-angle perspective that allows for complementary realities to play simultaneously before us, or even what it leaves out – such as the drowning death of Clara, Rita's daughter, who just vanishes. And in terms of content, its focus on memory and its interplay with History, as well as its questioning of identities predicated on loss and absence, it is as daring as it is hard. Speaking with Margarida Cardoso, Lídia Jorge referred to *Yvone Kane* as a difficult film ([17 March 2015](#)). But perhaps what is difficult is not the film, all its complexity notwithstanding, but what it asks of us. Seven years after its opening, *Yvone Kane* keeps on asking us to confront the colonial past, while making us realise, no matter how hard it may be, that there is no possibility for reparation. In the end memory does not offer solace. The dead remain dead, the dispossessed just so, in ever growing numbers. In these last seven years, as the world steadily falls again to the grip of deadly ideologies long thought buried, *Yvone Kane* has only gained in urgency. By now it should be clear that you cannot bury the ghosts of the past by filling in a swimming pool with sand.

There are many ways of reading the last scene, which lingers on until Rita lowers her head and the screen turns dark. One, following Margarida Cardoso's own observation, is to see it as an index of a spectrality of the future. Another, having Adorno in mind, might be to see it as an opening for redemption. In Adorno's well-known phrase at the end ('*Zum Ende*') of *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*: 'The only philosophy which can be responsibly practised in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique'.<sup>[4]</sup> The lives Margarida Cardoso lets us contemplate in *Yvone Kane* are all damaged and yet, perhaps, even if reparation is impossible, there might still be hope: hope that another generation might heed the call of memory and try to build a better world instead of vainly laying sand over the ghosts in the pool.

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[1] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* ([1981] London: Routledge, 2002, 88).

[2] [Yvone Kane, press kit.](#)

[3] "Safety in Numbness: Some remarks on the Problems of «Late Photography»" in David Green, ed. [Where is the Photograph?](#) (Photoworks/Photoforum, 2003).

[4] Theodor W. Adorno. *Mimima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem Beschädigten Leben* (Suhrkamp, 1951, 480): 'Zum Ende. – Philosophie, wie sie im Angesicht der Verzweiflung einzig noch zu verantworten ist, wäre der Versuch, alle Dinge so zu betrachten, wie sie vom Standpunkt der Erlösung aus sich darstellten. Erkenntnis hat kein Licht, als das von der Erlösung her auf die Welt scheint: alles andere erschöpft sich in der Nachkonstruktion und bleibt ein Stück Technik'. English translation by E.F.N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005).

Paulo de Medeiros is Professor in the Department of English & Comparative Literary Studies at the University of Warwick, UK. He is an associate researcher for the project *MEMOIRS - Children of Empires and European Postmemories* (ERC No. 648624) and *MAPS - European Postmemories: a postcolonial cartography* (FCT - PTDC/LLT-OUT/7036/2020).

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