



obs- cure

light

a film by
susana de sousa dias

synopsis

How many members of a family get dragged into the web of the political police on the arrest of a single political prisoner?

How do you give form to someone who disappeared without having had a historical existence? Taking as its starting point the photographs taken by the Portuguese political police (1926-1974), *Obscure Light* seeks to reveal how an authoritarian system operates within the family intimacy, simultaneously revealing areas of repression which mould the present.

Obscure Light | *Luz Obscura*
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note of intent



From 2000 onward my work has focused on images produced by the Portuguese dictatorship. One of these images gave rise to the idea for the film *Obscure Light*. It was a police mug shot of Albina Fernandes. What is surprising is that this is an image which should never have existed in the context of judicial photography, strictly speaking: none of the three shots shows the subject in a typical pose and they do not meet the minimum conditions of objectivity required for this type of photography. The subject is not a single person but instead the photographs depict a mother holding her infant son on her lap; Albina Fernandes' face is not held up and she is not looking directly at the camera; her eyes are closed; her face is partially covered by the child; the mother and child don't stay still, resulting in a blurry image. The child has not even been identified and thus becomes an accessory in the image, the purpose of which is to identify the mother.

Albina Fernandes' photograph is a shining example of how judicial portraits, as an "element of force", can be thwarted by the subject being portrayed. What this photograph shows us is that a woman in all the subjectivity inherent to her condition (being a political prisoner, a mother) can shatter the power dynamics associated with the type of photograph in question, shattering the alleged principle of transparency and neutrality. Albina's images shine through the representational device thanks to the sheer power of the aspects which were sought to be overcome — in this case the condition of being a political prisoner and a mother —, simultaneously dismantling the power device the images constitute.

A desire to learn more about the people in the image induced me to embark on a quest to find the boy. It proved to be unexpectedly easy.

Rui nowadays lives close to his father's birthplace. Through him I found his sister, Isabel, and Álvaro, his elder brother. The three siblings are the children of Octávio Pato, a well-known figure who was held as a political prisoner during the resistance against the dictatorship. When I started this project, over ten years ago, I thought that it would set out on the basis of the experiences of these three siblings in modern times. However, while making the film the dead and those who had been forgotten by History began to emerge so intensely that the film followed another path.

Thus, while one of the initial questions continued — what family network is hidden behind a single political prisoner? — other questions appeared over the course of making the film, which became articulated with my two previous films, *Natureza Morta* (2005) and *48* (2009): how does one deal with the temporality of images from the past? How do you bring to life someone who disappeared without ever having had a historical existence? At the same time other questions of a strictly cinematographic nature arose: how can one deal with the idea of confinement in cinematographic terms? How can one go beyond a type of filming device which I thought was the most suitable to capture the testimonies, but the intrinsic characteristics of which entailed dealing with its limitations from the outset?

Continuing a reflection about the images captured by the PIDE and cinematographic ways of working with them, *Obscure Light* focuses on events which go beyond factual knowledge of things and translate into situations which are frequently never voiced, never shown and never written down. Exhuming memories of the dead and those who have been forgotten in the mists of time and revealing weak memories forgotten by history and by our collective memory are some of the film's aims.



interview with Susana de Sousa Dias

How did you choose this title, *Obscure Light*?

I actually thought of the title many years ago. When I was studying fine arts I read *L'Amour* by Marguerite Duras, in which she referred to an obscure light. This oxymoron stuck in my head and when I began this film I decided to use it as a title. The film sets out from personal, intimate, memories, from words which are sometimes never said. The Italian historian Enzo Traverso speaks of “strong memories” and “weak memories”. While strong memories are memories nurtured by states and by official entities, weak memories are underground, hidden, forbidden. My films always set out from this desire to bring weak memories into the spotlight, memories which are in limbo, forgotten.

How did you think of this idea to make a film about the children of political prisoners?

When I saw the archives of the Portuguese Political Police (PIDE) for the first time – which was a life-changing experience for me – there was a historian who asked me if I had ever thought of the children of political prisoners and she told me there was a picture of one of these children. I went to look for this image. There were various children who were locked up, there were even children who had been born in prison, but to date this is the only mug shot photograph known to exist in this archive of a child with its mother.

This photograph had an indelible impact on me. Not just because it was such a young child, sitting on his mother's lap, but also for reasons I would consciously realise only years later. This was an image where the subjects total broke with the representational device, thwarting the system of force which is typical of judicial photographs. It is an image which is simultaneously very fragile and very powerful. I decided to try and find the boy to learn the story behind the photograph. This was the point of departure for the film. My initial idea was to make a film about the children of political prisoners, i.e. how the children viewed their parents' situations and the particular aspect of the parents having fought for the freedom of a country based on the model of the Soviet political system, which had collapsed in the meanwhile. However, from the moment I started to make the film, what happened was that I began to unravel the family network behind a single political prisoner, which nobody ever mentions. These people — uncles, aunts, grandparents, etc. — had already died and apart from this they do not exist from the historical point of view. They simply disappeared with the passage of time, even though many of them too were also arrested by the political police. It so happened that over the course of the editing they began to be revealed very intensely. In a certain sense I felt that I was watching bodies being exhumed.

What was the greatest challenge while speaking about Portuguese political prisoners after the film *48*?

48 is a film about an extreme experience and it encompasses a very broad range of people. In the case of *Obscure Light* it is a film which revolves around a kind of *huis-clos*, a space which is closed in various senses. It looks at a family and I try to understand how the PIDE acted within the family. Thus, it's the story of a family, there are certain people, in this case three brothers, and there are personal memories, invoking people who have already disappeared and do not have a voice. We can only learn about these people through an affective memory which shines through the official photos taken by the political police and brings them alive in the present, doing away with their apparent transparency. On the other hand, I am equally interested, from a formal point of view and from a cinematographic point of view, in developing the idea of confinement. How can one, through cinematographic material, transmit this idea of confinement, which is not just family confinement, but is also the confinement of a regime. This aspect brings us to not just the Portuguese dictatorship but also to all dictatorships and authoritarian systems, not only in the past but also in the present.

This is a film about events which happened in the 1960s and 1970s. What does this have to do with us nowadays?

Well, unfortunately these issues are always pertinent. One only has to think of the situation in the United States currently, with Donald Trump threatening to again make torture official, to legitimise torture. *Obscure Light* focuses on a family whose members were tortured, violently tortured. And it also deals with the problem of the children in a broad sense. Again citing the example of the USA, if we think about the situation of the deportations that Trump is threatening, we can see that there are children involved for whom this problem of their parents being removed due to decisions by a political system is an extremely pressing issue.

Coming back to the film: *Obscure Light* focuses on events in the past which continue to have repercussions in the present. It tries to reflect on the question of the construction of memory, confronting personal memories and official memories, conveyed here by images created by the political police, as well as to reflect on post-memory. Just like in *48*, in different ways, *Obscure Light* attempts to make stories from the past transversal to the present. When I made *48*, many people asked me “But what's the story of these people? Why were they arrested?” In *48* the people are already in jail. We do not know why they were arrested and we do not know why they were released, it is not part of the film. One of the characters in the film *Obscure Light* is one of the people in *48*. The story that is told in *Obscure Light*, albeit indirectly, is a kind of small ramification of *48* in the sense that it develops the story of one of the characters and members of this family. In this sense yes, if I began to make a film about each of the people in *48* that would result in a kind of rhizome of the Estado Novo and the extensions of the dictatorship.

In terms of a cinematographic discourse, properly speaking, what challenges did you face in relation to the source material? How does cinema correspond to the need to deal with strong and weak memories and with small stories and the big picture?

I'll start by answering the question about the material. Most of this film was filmed ten years ago: all the eye-witness accounts, all the images of the farm where they spent their childhood. So it was a film which began to be made before *48*. One of the great difficulties I faced at the time was to find the best way and the best device for transmitting these memories. I reached an impasse and so I then moved on to making *48*. I finished *48* and then returned to this film. However, the filmed material itself has an archival quality, since the material is already ten years old. Moreover, they are fragile materials, because they were filmed on DVCam, a format which is far removed from the quality of modern day recordings. My work had to take this fragility into consideration, the deterioration of the archival footage and contamination while it was being transposed to a digital format. However, from an audio point of view it also incorporated seemingly trivial sounds, such as a person shifting their weight while sitting in a chair, a sigh, a plane flying overhead, as well as all the sounds one could hear on the farm — it was important to me to capture some eye-witness accounts at that site and they were contaminated by a host of nature's sounds, in all their splendour. In my view there is a very important question in relation to cinema, which is that cinema is not just something that we use from an intellectual or emotive point of view. I think it is fundamental to experience the corporal, the physical, in other words, cinema entails experiencing the entire range of sensory perceptions. Having a sensorial experience is a fundamental aspect of my films.

What surprised you the most while listening to the stories of these children, the offspring of political prisoners? What fact surprised you the most?

What surprised me the most, especially considering I have interviewed many political prisoners, was to see how the children of political prisoners — who were in some cases themselves also held as political prisoners — spoke of their memories very vividly, as though it had happened yesterday. What happens, what you see, is that the adult in them is no longer speaking and the child emerges. That was totally astounding for me, from one instant to the next you can suddenly see the events from their memories actually come to life and it's as though the child's experiences are taking place in the present, in a very powerful manner. Another aspect which impressed me greatly was that sometimes the discourse dissolves into images. How do you create an image of an image that is conjured up by words?

Does this film conclude a cycle?

Ah, that's an interesting question! Does this conclude a cycle or not? I have another project I am finalising currently which was originally linked to *Obscure Light* but it then followed another path. It's a film which is directly related to the Soviet Union and it is a coincidence that it is being completed in the year that marks the centenary of the October Revolution. I am currently also preparing a project that takes place in Angola and concerns colonialism and post-colonialism, the current geopolitical situation and the shift in global centres. I do not know whether *Obscure Light* concludes a cycle or not... I think that each film gives rise to another, in a never ending cycle.

biography

Susana de Sousa Dias was born in Lisbon, Portugal. She holds a PhD in Fine Arts/ Video, an MPhil in Aesthetics and Art Philosophy, a BA in Fine Arts-Painting, and a BA in Cinema. She studied music at the National Conservatory. Among her cinematic works are *Natureza Morta-Visages d'une dictature* (2005, Atalanta award, Merit Prize Taiwan IDF), *48* (2009, Grand Prix Cinéma du Réel, FIPRESCI award) and *Natureza Morta / Stilleben* (installation, 2010). *Obscure Light* is her most recent film. She exhibited her works at international film festivals and art exhibitions worldwide (Viennale, Visions du Réel, Sarajevo IFF, Torino FF, Mar del Plata Independent FF, PhotoEspaña, Documenta, etc.). In 2012, she was honoured with a tribute by Cinéma du Réel and was guest artist at the Robert Flaherty Film Seminar, New York. In the same year, she formed a collective which directed the International Film Festival Doclisboa for two consecutive editions (2012 and 2013). She lectures at the Fine Arts Faculty of the University of Lisbon.



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