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# Vernacular Photography and Police Archives: Reconstructed Memory in the Cinema of Susana de Sousa Dias

# Fotografía vernácula y archivos policiales. La memoria reconstruida en el cine de Susana de Sousa Dias

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**Abstract:**
In her films, Susana de Sousa Dias (b. Lisbon, 1962) reflects on the limits and gaps in official discourses in Portugal's recent history. Some of her productions examine the blind spots of the Salazar dictatorship, uncovering the episodes suppressed, the voices silenced, and the faces erased in the hegemonic narratives. De Sousa Dias exposes these elements and, most importantly, denounces the processes of discursive construction that have forged a collective memory based almost exclusively on the narrative of the victors. To do this, she uses a substantial amount of photographic material and often brings it into dialogue with filmmaking techniques. This study focuses on three of her films (*Still Life*, *48* and *Dark Light*), identifying where this photographic material can be found in these productions, what techniques she uses to integrate it into her filmography and, above all, what the static image contributes to her cinematic narratives. In addition, the analysis of these films will facilitate further exploration of the productive relationship between photography and cinema.

**Resumen:**
La filmografía de Susana de Sousa Dias (Lisboa, 1962) reflexiona sobre los límites y vacíos que han dejado los discursos oficiales en la historia reciente de Portugal. A lo largo de algunas de sus producciones, nos aproxima a los puntos ciegos de la dictadura salazarista. A través de sus películas es posible descubrir los episodios escamoteados, las voces silenciadas y los rostros borrados de los relatos hegemónicos del país vecino. De Sousa Dias desvela esos pasajes y, principalmente, denuncia los procesos de construcción discursiva que forjan una memoria colectiva basada, casi de forma exclusiva, en el relato de los vencedores. Para este propósito, la directora utiliza una cuantiosa cantidad de material fotográfico y lo hace dialogar, en muchos casos, con técnicas propias de la creación cinematográfica. Esta investigación se centra en tres de sus películas (*Naturaleza Morta*, *48* y *Luz Obscura*) y explora dónde puede encontrarse ese material fotográfico en estas producciones, qué técnicas se usan para su inserción en el cine de de Sousa Dias y, sobre todo, qué aporta la imagen fotográfica a sus relatos fílmicos. Además, y a través del análisis de estas películas, se ahondará en la fértil relación entre la fotografía y el cine.

**Keywords**: Photography; Cinema; Memory; Women; Visual history; Image.

**Palabras clave:** Fotografía; cine; memoria; mujeres; historia visual; imagen.

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## 1. Introduction – Between the Static Image and the Dynamic Image: Photography in Cinema

The relationship between photographic and audiovisual images (in a broad sense of the term) is intimate, complex, and productive. Over the course of the history of visual media, these two forms of expression have shared connections on many levels, creating something more than the mere sum of their parts. Although this study could have any number of starting points, given that it would be possible to go back practically to the invention of cinema to explore this nexus (Parejo, 2012, p. 64), the point identified here as the catalyst for this interaction is the seminal vision of the multifaceted Hungarian artist László Moholy-Nagy, not only because of the evidence in his creative practice of a firm intention to blur the boundaries between different media forms to create what he called "total art" (Vélez & Zelich, 2005, pp. 7-9), but also because the intersections and points of tension between film and photography always formed part of the theoretical foundation underpinning his work.

The prescient nature of Moholy-Nagy's holistic approach helps explain why today we can describe photography and cinema as "two complementary languages" (Ledo, 2005, p. 17) rather than the same language. However, his experimental theory of artistic practice is not the only one to reflect on this question. Others who have considered it in their theoretical frameworks include key figures in the study of the image, such as Philippe Dubois (1986) and André Bazin (1966). Both these authors ultimately point to temporality as a theoretical key to understanding this connection, and both associate the photographic image with the progression of time that cinema aims to capture. In other words, for both theorists, cinema effectively creates a "perceptual illusion" (Parejo, 2012, p. 65) where "the image of things is likewise the image of their duration" (Bazin, 2005, p. 15).

The list of authors who have explored this question could be further expanded to include such well-known examples as Roland Barthes with his "*ça-a-été*" or "this has been" (1990), Gilles Deleuze (1996), Raymond Bellour

(2009), Rosalind Krauss (2010), and Omar Calabrese (2012), to cite just a few of the most relevant. The intersections between the two disciplines can therefore be described as numerous. There is a virtual consensus among these authors that the photographic image tends to freeze and objectify an act (we could return again and again to what Cartier-Bresson calls the "decisive moment"), while cinema is understood as an art of time (Martin, 2002), "an apparatus that produces time and that produces meanings over the course of time" (Zunzunegui, 2016).

It is unquestionable that this line of reasoning regarding the sum of the attributes of the photographic medium, such as its ability to produce images that are instantaneous, unique (with the possibility of being copied but always reflecting the same moment) and static, is present in our visual culture, but its limitations are also well-known. There are numerous photographic practices dissociated from the notion of photography described above that instead reflect its capacity, in certain cases, to show an event in time in a way that can convey a chronological progression within the same frame, or sequentially, without this necessarily constituting a manipulation of the medium. Chronophotography, photo overlays, and certain variations on the photonovel are possible examples of this.[1]

This study recognizes the use of such practices (and many others) that effectively refute the idea of a photograph as an object that is always located "outside of time" (Burgin, 2010, p. 135), although as Parejo points out, the three most common methods of incorporating photographic images into a film are the suspension of profilmic time, the freeze-frame shot, and photographic inserts.

The suspension of profilmic time can be found in films such as *La macchina ammazzacattivi* (Roberto Rossellini, 1948), *Last Year at Marienbad* (*L'année derniére a Marienbad,* Alain Resnais, 1961), and more recently,

[1] A detailed review of these and many other similar photographic practices can be found in Corrales Crespo (2012). In his doctoral research, Acero Sánchez (2017) offers an exhaustive study of the spatiotemporal relationships between photography, cinema, and videographic images. Another excellent source for further exploration of these questions is *Time and Photography* (Baetens, Streitberger & Van Gelder, 2010).

*Dogville* (Lars von Trier, 2003), which contain scenes where the movement of characters or sets is interrupted, although the camera keeps moving through the space and the story continues.

The freeze-frame image, which does not actually involve the use of a photograph but does appear like one (the footage is paused in post-production for some specific cinematic purpose), is used in legendary films such as *The 400 Blows* (*Les 400 coups*, Truffaut, 1959). In this case, we see an image that is static but essential to the development of the film. The flow of images is disrupted to the point of being frozen in the end, but without losing the "added value of meaning" (Parejo, 2012, p. 75).

The third technique is the insertion of photographs when these form the basis of the narrative structure of the film or an important part of it. It could be argued that the film transforms these photographs into shots and that it is constructed out of these static images. This technique can be found in *La jetée* (Chris Marker, 1962), possibly the most extensively analyzed film to use such filmmaking techniques, but also in *Remembrance of Things to Come* (*Le souvenir d'un avenir*, Chris Marker and Yannick Bellon, 2001), which was created using Denise Bellon's photographic archives. Other examples include *Letter to Jane* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1972) and some of the films of directors such as Abbas Kiarostami and Harun Farocki. In Spain, there have been the audiovisual experiments of *Estación de Chamartín* (Manolo Vidal, 1981), a short film that effectively stars Robert de Niro because it features photos of the actor published in various magazines, and the interesting sequence in the film *El Futuro* (Luis López Carrasco, 2014), where a series of snapshots of a Francoist family is shown to the music of the Spanish synthpop band Aviador Dro.

Of course, it is possible to identify other creative strategies associated with the use of photographs in films, such as the time-lapse photography used in *Koyaanisqatsi* (George Reggio, 1983) and its sequels *Powaqqatsi* (1988) and *Naqoyqatsi* (2002). In a certain sense, this brief outline of prominent titles in film history constitutes a corpus of audiovisual practices that compel the spectator to view a single image or a limited series of (quasi-)static images

over an extended period of time. Perhaps one of the most extreme example of this practice is the 8-hour, 5-minute shot filmed by Andy Warhol at the Empire State Building in New York City for *Empire* (1964), which clearly proposes a viewing experience in keeping with the above description.

As will be discussed below, it is in this context of creation (straddling the line between visual experimentation and cinematographic construction with photographs) that the approach of Portuguese filmmaker Susana de Sousa Dias can be understood. Filming and inserting photographs into her work, thereby fostering a viewing experience that holds the spectator's gaze on effectively static images is a creative approach used extensively by this filmmaker, with significant implications for the stories her films tell. It is also a visual strategy that takes on certain forms and characteristics that are worthy of detailed analysis.

## 2. The Films of Susana de Sousa Dias: Archive, Photography, and a Clear Intention to Disturb

The filmography of Portuguese director Susana de Sousa Dias (b. Lisbon 1962) is widely known on the contemporary documentary and experimental film circuit. De Sousa holds a PhD in fine arts (with a major in audiovisual studies) and she works as a professor at the University of Lisbon's Faculty of Fine Arts. She has made five feature films and other audiovisual productions that have won her numerous awards both at home in Portugal and internationally.

Although her oeuvre contains a wide range of identifying enunciation markers, De Sousa Dias's work can be said to be characterized by a clear intention to re-examine and re-signify images found in family, police, military, and corporate archives with the aim of recovering the repressed memory of a past marked by the Salazar dictatorship that controlled Portugal for much of the 20th century.

There is something of a consensus that De Sousa Dias's filmmaking can be defined by two basic focal points that act as a sort of foundation or raw

material out of which she constructs her films. The first of these is the "interminable four decades of the *Estado Novo*" (Fernández, 2023, p. 11), the longest fascist dictatorship in 20th-century Western European history. What is known today as the Salazar dictatorship underwent several political stages: the Military Dictatorship (1926-1928); the National Dictatorship (1928-1933), and finally the *Estado Novo* (1933-1974). António de Oliveira Salazar was the regime's head of government from 1932 to 1968, and his name tends to be used to identify the whole period (Rosas, 1994, pp. 151-558). The filmmaker also takes a particular interest in her country's colonial and neocolonial history (especially in the context of the Portuguese Colonial War fought in Africa in the 1960s and 1970s) and in the tools of repression created by the dictatorship to eradicate all manner of internal opposition to the regime, such as the state police force, Polícia Internacional e de Defesa do Estado (PIDE).

The second focal point is the way Portugal's collective memory has been tailored to fit the narrative of the victors of these historical processes, effectively erasing much of what actually took place. De Sousa Dias delves into the archives of police photographs of Salazar's political prisoners, family photo albums, propaganda images of the colonial wars, and corporate archives to construct counter-narratives that challenge the official history of the regime and propose a new collective understanding of the Portuguese reality. She thus contrasts institutionalized memories or *memorias fuestes* (Traverso, 2007, p. 86), i.e., stories that have been firmly entrenched in the collective imagination,[2] against discourses that have been marginalized, forbidden, and silenced by the powers that be, which need to be uncovered in order to properly address what really happened in those years.

Before examining the techniques adopted in some of her productions, it is worth offering a brief description here of the films by de Sousa Dias discussed in this study. In 2005, she released *Still Life* (*Natureza Morta*), a

[2] As the director herself has argued on several occasions, the notion of *memorias fuestes* coined by the Italian historian Enzo Traverso to refer to a type of representation of the past alludes to how official discourses become consolidated in societies and ultimately create particular collective images of the present.

film that attempts to reconstruct the years of the Salazar regime using images from the period that reflect the lesser-known features of Portugal's colonial past. In her next film, released in 2009 and titled *48* (in reference to the 48 years of the Salazar dictatorship), de Sousa Dias constructs an in-depth analysis of the period using the mugshots of some of the regime's political prisoners, combined with their oral testimonies. In 2017, she released *Dark Light* (*Luz Obscura*), which once again uses police photos taken by the PIDE as raw material, this time to tell the story of a family torn apart by the dictatorship. Vernacular photography is also featured here with pictures from family albums.[3]

These brief descriptions already reveal the recurring presence of certain notable features in de Sousa Dias's filmography. Her interest in archives and the images they contain not only constitutes a starting point for her work on each of these films but also involves an approach requiring long periods of research, meticulous selection of the material to be included in her films, and the technical treatment and editing of each image based on the discourses she seeks to construct with her cinematic narratives.

Archiving (of photographs, film footage, documents, etc.) involves the selection, cataloging, and preservation of a collection of institutional, individual, or family materials that can take various forms (Sánchez Vigil, Salvador Benítez & Olivera Zaldua, 2022, p. 63). Essentially, archiving is the collection of items for the purposes of bequeathing them to future generations. It is thus obvious that certain conditions determine the potential "archivability" (Mbembe, 2002) or exclusion of such materials.[4] In other words, who is archiving, what is being archived, and how it is archived ultimately shapes our vision of the past and our idea of the present.

[3] Although they are not analyzed in this study, de Sousa Dias has since released two other films worth noting here: *Fordlândia Malaise* (2019), a reflection on what is left of the project launched by the Ford Motor Company in the mid-20th century in the Brazilian Amazon using extensive archival and original material; and *Viage ao sol* (2019), a documentary co-directed with Ansgar Schafer that uses vernacular photography to explore the story of Austrian children granted asylum in Portugal after World War II.

[4] As Mbembe himself explains, archives are the product of processes to determine which materials meet a specific set of criteria (established in the present) for cataloging and classification; in this sense, archiving is a matter of selection and of discrimination (Mbembe, 2002, p. 20).

This is why Derrida gave his personal reflection on the contemporary conception of the archive the title *Mal d'archive* (1995). Since then, there have been numerous critical studies of the "coding mandates" (Cerdán & Fernández Labayen, 2022, p. 8) for archival projects that conceive of the archive as a "site of state power" (Cerdán & Fernández Labayen, 2022, p. 11). Although there are many authors who understand the archive as a potential site of protest, what makes de Sousa Dias's work interesting is the way she presents her particular critical reflection in audiovisual form based on photographic material, and that she does this to propose the construction of a "counter-archive" (Scheinkopf, 2024, p. 113) that can serve to rewrite the official history and address the appalling omissions referred to above.

This points to a second notable characteristic of de Sousa Dias's work, as to some extent her oeuvre establishes a photocinematic or cinephotographic binary. The frequent and very obvious connection made in her films with photography has been analyzed on numerous occasions. For example, in 2011, as part of the International Festival of Photography and Visual Arts (PHotoEspaña), her film *48* was screened as an artistic installation at the Matadero Madrid.[5] In the context of this event, and at other times in her career, the filmmaker herself has offered reflections on her work with photographic material and its importance in her filmmaking. And it is precisely this relationship, this tension in the connection de Sousa Dias establishes between photography and cinema (or photography *in* cinema) that will be the focus of this study.

## 3. Research Design: Hypotheses, Objectives, and Methodology

The use of a photograph as a document based on the information it contains was already intrinsic to photography at the time of its invention in the 19th century (Souguez, 2009, p. 369 ff.). The notion of photography as a medium capable of providing what is almost a legal document of reality (Rubio, 2006, p. 14) has coexisted alongside other much more creative conceptions of the

[5] https://www.mataderomadrid.org/programacion/susana-de-sousa-dias-48

medium ever since its inception, ultimately leading to the development of two main paradigms for photographic images, which could be summarized very simply as the documentary paradigm and the artistic paradigm.

A number of photography schools and movements today are embracing what has been referred to as the "documentary style" (Lugon, 2010), and photographic images are even being used for their aforementioned testimonial value in certain scientific and professional procedures. The conception of the photograph as a "social document" (Freund, 2008), its contributions to disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, and historiography, and its use in journalistic and communications practices of different kinds are just a few examples of this.

While the notion of the photograph as a document raises numerous epistemological questions and points for debate, there can be no denying that this paradigm is still widely accepted today. That acceptance does not come without innumerable complications (as evidenced by many of the contemporary theories on the relationship between digital photography and the notion of truth). But beyond these questions, the medium's accessibility and ease of use (Bourdieu, 2003, p. 51) have enshrined it as one of the most popular instruments in our visual culture for portraying and documenting events. It is thus a tool that since its invention has provided us with important testimonies to human history. As visual support for a text, as a means of presenting political or social situations, and as content for inclusion in personal archives (vernacular photography) or institutional (medical, police, military, and corporate) archives, photographs have been recognized as artefacts worthy of collection and preservation.

Susana de Sousa Dias's films make good use not only of photographs themselves, but also of their documentary value, although she does this in a very unique way: after identifying a number of lacunae and blind spots in her country's institutional archives and official narratives (which are described and analyzed below), she sets out to reconstruct these "words that were not documented or were cut short, images that do not exist, history that was erased" (Villarme & Limón, 2022, p. 155). To this end, she uses a diverse

range of strategies, such as confronting spectators with different views of the audiovisual or photographic material, bringing to light images not previously made public, and including testimonies that reveal the *intrahistory* of macrohistorical processes. This way of "activating the archive" (Paalman, Fossati & Masson, 2021) is thus transformed into a political act that conceives of archives not merely as heritage sites commemorating the past but also as tools that can be worked with today.

In light of the above, the aim of this study is to test the hypothesis that Susana de Sousa Dias makes use of photographic materials in her films in certain ways that could be classified as subversive because they facilitate a revision and a fulfillment of the documentary value of photographs preserved mainly in institutional and family archives. In this process, the filmmaker's use of such photographs has at least three objectives: (1) to confront spectators with visual practices that are highly unconventional in technical terms; (2) to contribute something of value to the communities portrayed in her films by creating audiovisual stories that are useful to society in some way; and (3) to work toward the reconstruction of Portugal's historical past while tracing connections with the country's present.

In addition, this study aims to identify what de Sousa Dias's work is contributing to the fields of cinema and photography, to explore new practices in the contemporary use of photographic documents of the past, and to reflect on the aforementioned documentary value of the photograph as a means of creating counter-histories and deconstructing hegemonic narratives founded on the discourses of the victors. Needless to say, this article also has the purpose of drawing attention to the work of a filmmaker who has made significant contributions to film history and to the subversive use of photographic images with the aim of shaping a new visual culture.

This article focuses on de Sousa Dias's first three films, which ultimately laid the foundations for her particular approach to the use of photography in cinema. It therefore offers descriptions and analyses of the films *Still Life*, *48*, and *Dark Light*, although reference is also made to other works by the filmmaker where appropriate. The research methodology used is the case

study approach, which allows for descriptions and explanations of the images without neglecting the importance of wider contexts for the adoption of a more general view (Yin, 2003; Pérez-Serrano, 1994-), although other approaches are also considered, particularly historical, semiotic, and technical perspectives. This research therefore touches on various different but related fields, such as the history of photography, film history, historical interpretation, and documentary analysis.

Finally, two methodological procedures are taken into account for the analysis of certain features of the images under study: (1) specific criteria for the analysis of photographs in relation to their historical interpretation (such as the identification of their origin, their sources, the archives where they are kept, their genre, and their content), in accordance with the methodological model proposed by María Olivera, Antonia Salvador and Juan Miguel Sánchez Vigil (2024); and (2) the levels of interpretation and items outlined in the analytical model proposed by Javier Marzal Felici (2009, pp. 169 ff.).

It is important to note that the intention of this research is not to provide a compilation of contextual, morphological, compositional, or enunciative data on the images featured in the films chosen for study, but to use the criteria of photographic analysis to describe, analyze, and explain visual practices used by de Sousa Dias in the films in question. Priority is therefore given to methodological formulations that can shed light on the main features of these films in order to identify the arguments, purposes, and characteristics of each one, in pursuit of the research objectives outlined above.

## 4. Discussion of Results: Using Vernacular Photography and Police Archives to Reconstruct Lost Memory

The three films analyzed in this study were made over a 12-year period. As described above, there are observable differences between their plotlines and the techniques used by de Sousa Dias in each film are unique, although there are also close connections between them that reflect a consistent approach maintained by the director over more than a decade. For the purpose of this

study, the insertion of photographs and their treatment constitute the main defining feature of all three films. These visual creation processes and the main artistic and documentary strategies adopted by the filmmaker are explained and analyzed below.

### 4.1 The Film as an Experiential Space: *Still Life*

In approximately 70 minutes, *Still Life* interrogates one of the ideological pillars of the dictatorial regime that ruled Portugal for almost fifty years: the territorial unity of the Portuguese empire, underpinned by a mystique sustained by the Catholic Church, the army, and the Portuguese state police. Thus, in what can be described as her first feature film, de Sousa Dias explores two of the most significant concerns of her filmography. First, she begins the film with Portugal's colonial and neocolonial experiences in Africa; then, she deals with the Salazar regime's repression of the population and the role played by the state police in the dictatorship. Although these are two different processes (in the final analysis, they are distinct historical events), it is easy to identify a close connection between them in the political model imposed by Salazar (as the regime's ideologue), which traced a line of continuity between Portugal and its colonies. The Portuguese Colonial War that broke out in the 1960s made Salazar's dictatorship even more brutal than it had been up until then. On a contextual level, this film conducts a sort of autopsy on the regime, tracking its decline to the bitter end and the colonial war that was intertwined with this process.

To provide this historical contextualization, which is present from the very beginning of the film, de Sousa Dias uses the following materials: textual support (such as the caption that introduces the audiovisual narrative), archival film footage (in most cases propaganda films), photographs from police files, and a soundtrack comprised exclusively of music. The images are subjected to techniques including slow motion, subtle panning, reframing, and zoom-outs, among others (which are further examined below because these are also used, with slight variations, in the other two films analyzed). *Still Life* has no dialogue or narrator to explain the chronological progression of the events it shows. This renders it something of an experimental

documentary production that effectively foregrounds the visual component, which forms the essence of its material. In other words, the film exhibits certain features that set it very much apart from conventional cinema in technical terms, largely due to the treatment of the large volume of photographic material it contains.

The film begins with black-and-white footage of a monkey played back in slow motion, which gives way to images taken in the colonies, and then a caption explaining the historical processes that took place under the dictatorship. However, this is soon followed by portraits of people identified as political prisoners. As indicated in the credits, much of this material was obtained from the following archives: Centro de Audiovisuales del Ejercito, Cinemateca Portuguesa-Museo del Cine, Instituto de los Archivos Nacionales/Torre do Tombo, and Radio Televisión Portugesa. These institutions currently hold the material used in all three of the films analyzed here, although many of these photographs (dating from 1945 to 1969) in turn came from the archives of the Polícia Internacional e de Defesa do Estado (PIDE), which was subsequently renamed Direção-Geral de Segurança (DGS) from 1969 to 1974. There is also footage of the Portuguese Colonial War that de Sousa Dias found in the military archives of the Centro de Audiovisuales del Ejercito (CAVE).

In addition to the sequences featuring footage taken in the colonies (the vast majority of which was subsequently used in propaganda films made by the regime itself in an effort to promote the idea of a united Portugal spanning multiple continents, although there are also scenes showing the extreme violence of the colonial war), there is also a significant number of photographs extracted from prison files. The presentation of these pictures, numbering more than fifty in total, is notable for two reasons. The first is the extended duration of their appearance on screen (sometimes longer than ten seconds), in shots that are either static or marked by slight reframing or subtle lateral camera movements. This approach would become a signature technique of the director, who would go on to adopt a similar strategy in the treatment of pictures in the other two films analyzed here, thereby

establishing a hallmark of her own. The second reason is related to the first, as the extended duration of the shots of these photographs (mostly frontal but also including some profile pictures) obviously confronts the spectator with the faces of the people they portray. *Still Life* presents some largely unknown images (of the colonies, but also of political prisoners under the Salazar regime) to force viewers to study them actively and in detail, laying bare the discourse proposed by the filmmaker, who seeks to bring an end to the "non-inscription" (Gil, 2004, p. 17) of these events in the collective gaze. As the philosopher José Gil explains, this absence of public space, of collective memory, and ultimately of any site of representation was characteristic of the Salazar regime and prevented the Portuguese from affirming and securing their individual autonomy during the period.

These focused, prolonged views ultimately break through the icy surface of the apparently objective mugshots and inscribe them intensely in a different viewing experience. This film confronts spectators with what has been repressed, with the extreme violence of certain footage taken in the colonies (there are scenes in the film that hint at dismembered bodies), but also with the inquisitive looks of those persecuted by the dictatorship. The prisoners' gazes (which are in a sense an act of resistance) appeal to the spectator, disrupting the physical and cinematic apparatus and proposing what de Sousa Dias describes as experiential viewings: "I never treated images as lifeless things. I always sought to see them in their dimension as events," explains the filmmaker herself (Villarme Álvarez & Limón Serrano, 2022, p. 163).

This approach, which conceives cinema as a physical experience, involves at least the following steps: the selection of rarely published or even completely unknown images of important historical events; meticulous and individualized treatment of each image; editing that serves to contextualize them as pieces of a larger story; and unconventional visual treatment of the photographs to achieve an immersive viewing experience. These strategies assign an active role to audiences while aiming to disseminate facts that have been obscured or concealed for much of Portuguese history. The

development of these counter-narratives also reflects a conception of the archive not as a mere repository of material, but as a worksite, where the archive is on display. With *Still Life*, de Sousa Dias brushes "history against the grain" (Benjamin, 1995) to reconstruct a different discourse on Portugal's dictatorship and its colonial history.

### 4.2 The blind spots in the hegemonic narratives: *48*

One of the main issues de Sousa Dias faced when making these films was the paucity of representations showing what had really happened, the lack of images conveying the horror of the Salazar dictatorship. The document archives that have informed the official history suffer from two key limitations. The first is the physical absence of these materials, which has resulted in obvious lacunae in the narratives on the Salazar dictatorship. In particular, there is a lack of images portraying African political prisoners or documenting the acts of torture perpetrated by the regime. But the problem of this omission, which is mainly the result of the almost exclusive focus on celebratory images (taken for the propaganda films produced by the regime) and on White prisoners, is compounded by another issue. How can a handful of photographs capture the "state of horror" (Didi-Huberman, 2004)[6] imposed in those years? How can they portray the torture described by survivors, the violence inflicted on the population, the human rights violations, sleep deprivation, ideological surveillance—in short, the regime of terror maintained for almost fifty years that its victims have described? *48* (a title alluding to the number of years that the Salazar dictatorship lasted) addresses this very question.

Although this film is based primarily on the articulation of images contained in the state police archives and on the oral testimonies of the people who appear in them, it also addresses the absences described above. Even while acknowledging the existence of "the 'unrepresentable,' the 'unfigurable,' the 'invisible' and the 'impossible'" (Didi-Huberman, 2008, p. 60), de Sousa Dias

[6] This study draws on concepts posited by Didi-Huberman in his analysis of known images of the Holocaust. Although his analysis serves to point out some ideas of relevance to the argument developed in this article, it is important to note that this is not intended to imply any kind of comparison between two historical episodes that are obviously very different.

makes several technical choices to incorporate these lacunae, to demonstrate and problematize the limits of the archive and of official discourses. *48* shows that:

> Only on this basis does it make sense to affirm that the unrepresentable exists, and then to go on to sustain that it can be expressed (explained in images) by means of appropriate or heuristically effective strategies (that would be situated or acting in a space different from where it was originally witnessed). (Zunzunegui & Zumalde, 2019, pp. 110-111)

To enact this operation, the filmmaker chooses 16 survivors of the dictatorship who were imprisoned by the regime. Each one is treated as an independent unit in the film: as each story is told (like short chapters in a larger narrative), we see the mugshots from the PIDE files (all of which had already appeared in her previous film), while we listen to their voices describing the images and what they experienced at that time. The film includes no pictures or footage of these people in the present. All we see is a series of constantly changing photographs while we hear their testimonies, broken by the extended silences on which the whole film is constructed and the difficulties each one has narrating their experience.

A fade to black serves to separate each testimony and organize the frontal or profile shots that are linked together by lap dissolves or cuts throughout the film. The temporal dimension of the film is underscored by the visual relationships posited by the filmmaker. In *48*, she uses editing within the shot to create temporal depth: Each shot (showing a different prison file photo) is altered by means of slow reframing, camera pans across the image, or lap dissolves linking together several pictures that show the victims' successive arrests over the years (with their consequent physical decline). The photographs are transformed through the duration of the shots.

At the same time, the victims' testimonies facilitate a reconstruction of the record of extreme acts of torture that went largely undocumented. This way of exposing what has until now been concealed and contradicting the official history also serves to undo the dehumanization that has characterized these police archives, which hijack identities that have become ensnared in the

judicial photographic apparatus. De Sousa Dias provides each of these stories with a specific site of representation and gives them an identity as historical subjects. Among the victims there were also prisoners from the colonies and the Black population. The testimonies describe a regime that affected an entire population that was both culturally and generationally diverse, yet this is not reflected in the photographic archives. In response to this, the filmmaker adopts a technical strategy to highlight this striking gap: the scene that ends the film surprises the spectator with the testimony of a prisoner against a totally black background that occasionally offers glimpses of the shadow of a landscape and the profile of a person.

This visual strategy (in a morphological and compositional withdrawal of the image) of combining a black screen with the faltering testimony of the film's final speaker points directly to the two issues pointed out above: the physical absence of representations to show much of what happened under the dictatorship (especially in the Portuguese colonies of Angola, Mozambique, Guinea, Cape Verde, and Sao Tomas, where the PIDE imposed repressive force of which there is hardly any record) and the difficulty of conveying the tragedy. De Sousa Dias has chosen to offer viewers a reflection on these issues, as well as on the need to expose this gap by "explaining [it] with other images" (Zunzunegui and Zumalde, 2019, p. 113). For this filmmaker, expanding Portugal's historical memory involves rendering the deliberately created lacunae in the hegemonic discourses visible.

### 4.3 The contemporary impact of historical memory: *Dark Light*

In her previous film, de Sousa Dias chose (explicitly) not to include any contemporary images of the victims who offered their testimonies, despite the fact that all the interviews were filmed. By focusing on the power of the police mugshots and the gaps in these archives, she has created a film that aims to disseminate the failures of the systems of representation. *Dark Light* places spectators in a different setting, introducing them to the intrahistory of a family devastated by the dictatorship. In just a few seconds, the caption that opens the film recounts the life of Octavio Pato, a member of the Portuguese Communist Party who, like many others, was arrested and

tortured. Through the story of his children (identified as Álvaro, Isabel, and Rui), the spectator learns of a family's past, but also of an experience whose consequences continue into the present.

The importance of the contemporary impact of historical events, the repercussions that the dictatorship continues to have on Portugal today, is not a theme unique to *Dark Light*. As explained above, the testimonies featured in these films trace a line of continuity (and contiguity) between these events and a country celebrating the 50th anniversary of the end of the dictatorship in an effort to undo the "massive act of forgiveness" (Veigas, 2014, p. 11) that took place after these traumatic historical events: "It is about understanding how the past reaches into the present and how it cuts across our contemporary context" (Villarme Álvarez & Limón Serrano, 2022, p. 160). In the case of this film, this extended narration is the product of the multiple interviews that de Sousa Dias conducted with the children of the Pato family. The testimonies come from the people involved, who reconstruct their experiences and memories. But it is not only words here that provide the spectator with the stories of the past and its devastating effects, as for the first time the director also offers us images of the present.

In addition to the police photographs, other types of images are offered, marking a turning point in her filmography. First, she uses vernacular photography, including family snapshots showing the witnesses as children, some of their relatives, and some settings in their personal world. And, secondly, this time we see footage of the three people who tell their stories. While Álvaro appears several times speaking to camera, Isabel and Rui are shown in silence. The reconstruction of their memories includes images of the derelict house where some of the arrests took place and where they spent much of their life as a family. What is left of the bedrooms, toys, and kitchen utensils left behind give the spectator an insight into the complete collapse of the family's everyday world.

Although this may be the most technically conventional of the three films analyzed here (the people sharing their memories are shown as they are today, the inclusion of police mugshots and vernacular photographs

facilitates the reconstruction of the family's personal history, and the soundtrack and the transition shots of the landscape support this reconstruction), de Sousa Dias does not abandon her signature techniques. The reframing of the photographs, the use of slow motion, and the prolonged duration of the shots of the pictures, the fades to black that structure the film, and the lap dissolves between shots of photos to mark the passage of time are all used in *Dark Light*.

The time the spectator is given to view the images, to scan the surface of these documents, and to enter the private world of lives cut short by a past whose consequences continue to be felt in the present, reminds us that this was no benevolent dictatorship. The temporal fracture between images of the past and images of the present is sutured here with the evidence of the consequences of the regime that we perceive in the victims. Once again, the subtle camera movements during the filming of each of the mugshots and vernacular photographs serve as a trigger to draw viewers into the film and prompt them to reflect on what happened.

## 5. Conclusions

This study has focused on three films by the Portuguese director Susana de Sousa Dias that make intensive use of a range of photographic material for their construction. Through her use of these photographs, in some cases accompanied by other elements such as oral testimonies and audiovisual footage, de Sousa Dias identifies herself with the tradition of creators who have worked on the productive connection between photography and cinema. Highlighting the ability of photographic material to convey the ongoing impact of past events (the photographs in de Sousa Dias's films are never completely static and their meaning arises out of their cumulative effect), she offers a reconsideration of the documentary value ascribed to official images (such as police mugshots), but also those that represent our most personal memories (such as vernacular photography).

To this end, the filmmaker employs a range of creative strategies that can be classified in three categories. The first involves the use of prolonged shots of the photographs selected, which are subjected to subtle manipulations designed to catch the spectator's attention (especially slow motion, reframing, and lap dissolves), frequently accompanied by the use of silences that take on a key importance, serving as the foundation on which each film's semantic strategies are articulated. These strategies reinforce the repeated confrontation of the spectator with the faces of the victims and in many cases reflect the difficulties they have constructing a discourse that describes what happened to them. The second category is of strategies that render visible the lack of photographs of the historical events analyzed in her films (for example, the use of a black screen to reflect the absence of mugshots of African prisoners or images of the torture inflicted by the Salazar regime). And the third category highlights photography's ability to capture the passage of time and to identify the consequences of past historical events in the present. In this way, she conceives of the archives where these images are stored not merely as memory containers, but as work sites of contemporary relevance.

Through these strategies de Sousa Dias effectively opens up the images, exploring the aesthetic of transparency of these documents and, through the identification of the individuals represented in the photographs, exposing a whole system of forces that criminalized entire sectors of the Portuguese population or erased their presence from official discourses. This aesthetic, ethical, and political work with photography and archives offers the possibility of revising the official history through a collective gaze, with the aim of explaining how Portuguese society deals with this memory today (Veigas, 2014, p. 10). It is worth noting de Sousa Dias's special interest in taking up the particular issues faced by many of the women persecuted by the Salazar regime, whose experiences have, in the best of cases, been relegated to the margins of official narratives.

In *Still Life*, *48*, and *Dark Light*, de Sousa Dias questions the hegemonic discourses that shape the collective memory. And through this act of

(audio)visual resistance, she seeks a fairer way of examining one of the darkest chapters in Portuguese history, more accurately and honestly.

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