

East Timor in Margarida Gil's *Bitter Flowers*: The Power of the Unrooted Underdog

ANA ISABEL SOARES

CIAC / Universidade do Algarve

Flores Amargas [*Bitter Flowers*] (1989) is a medium feature made for television and Margarida Gil's fifth film. It appeared after Gil had released her first feature film for the big screen, *Relação Fiel e Verdadeira* [*True and Faithful*] (1987) and a documentary series for television, *Olho de Vidro: Uma História da Fotografia* [*Glass Eye: A History of Photography*] codirected with António Sena (1979 to 1982). *Bitter Flowers* originated from a commission by the Portuguese State TV broadcast company (RTP) for a series of television programmes, *Fados*, achieving 'o casamento do Cinema com a Televisão' [the marriage of TV and Cinema].¹ This combination is at the core of much of the director's work² — in the particular case of *Bitter Flowers*, it was clear that Margarida Gil wanted to set a personal point of view on a topic that was not central to the concerns of the average Portuguese citizen, but which she deemed relevant. The film responded to the need Gil identified for a Portuguese awareness or awakening to the problem of East Timor; the television format served this aim.

The territory now known as Timor Lorosa'e and officially designated República Demokrátika Timór-Leste was a Portuguese colony from the early sixteenth century when Portuguese merchants arrived on the Eastern side of the island, in 1512. East Timor was inhabited by the Mambai, who the colonizers

¹ 'Uma série para lembrar e que, ao abrigo do protocolo SEC/RTP, permitiu que realizadores, tanto da RTP como do exterior, dessem curso a experiências de diferentes linhas estéticas, contando, sobretudo, com meios mais largos que os habituais' [A series to be remembered, which, under a protocol between the Secretary of State for Culture and Portuguese Television, allowed directors both of RTP and others to follow different experiments in diverse aesthetic lines, most notably counting on larger funding than usual]. Fernando Lopes was the head of this project and he defined it as filling a void in Portuguese fiction to work with current topics, its goal being to 'esboçar imagens dos nossos gostos quotidianos, situações que digam qualquer coisa ao espectador' [sketch images of our routine tastes, situations that speak straight to the viewer], therefore evading the tendency 'que as ficções se passassem todas numa grande cidade, de forma a tocar outros aspectos da vida portuguesas' [to locate all fictions in a big city, and addressing other aspects of the Portuguese life], Vasco H. Teves, 'Produção Nacional: Uma aposta ganha', in *RTP: 50 Anos de História* (Lisbon: RTP, 2007), p. 13 <<https://museu.rtp.pt/livro/50Anos/Livro/DecadaDe80/ProducaoNacionalUmaApostaGanha/Pag13/default.htm>>. All translations into English are my own unless otherwise indicated.

² I attempt to show this in my analysis of Gil's fictional and non-fictional work. See Ana I. Soares, 'Four Decades on Screen: The Fiction Films of Margarida Gil', in *Women's Cinema in Contemporary Portugal*, ed. by Mariana Liz and Hilary Owen (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), pp. 43–62, and *Margarida Gil: quatro décadas de audiovisual* (Famalicão: Editora Húmus, 2021).

called Maubere. It took more than four and a half centuries for the country to be able to declare its independence, which eventually happened at the end of 1975. However, in early December that year, East Timor was invaded by Indonesian forces and annexed as one of the country's provinces. As the first state in the world to affirm its sovereignty in the twenty-first century, East Timor gained back its independence, acknowledged internationally in May 2002, upon a Self-Determination Act supported by the United Nations, and after the Indonesian government had left the territory in 1999. This came about in the aftermath of the death of the Indonesian president Suharto (1967–98), whose men (mostly Muslim) persecuted, tortured, and terrorized the East Timorese (predominantly Catholic).

Margarida Gil's work is therefore to be understood among the complexity of Western perspectives on East Timor, namely the intricate gaze the former colonizer directs at the historically oppressed Timorese. *Bitter Flowers* represents that gaze, primarily because it is set and shot in and from the outskirts of Lisbon, former capital of a colonial empire which started to disintegrate in 1822, with the independence of Brazil, and which was the originary site of the Democratic Revolution of 1974. In that contemplation the film offers a truly essential, self-critical viewpoint that was not common in the 1980s and is still not frequently found in the Portuguese audiovisual context.

I expect to further show the extent to which Margarida Gil's knowledge of William Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*, a work with profound meaning in the discussion of Western colonialism, is particularly revealed in *Bitter Flowers* through the representation of a Portuguese 'devil' portrayed very much like Shakespeare's Caliban; in other words, in the film the colonizer (the Portuguese) is embodied in a monster-like character that shares traits with the one used by the Bard — after Michel de Montaigne's essay 'On Cannibals' — to embody the misunderstood indigenous *cannibal-Caliban* in the play.³

East Timor, a very particular locus in faraway Asia, with its geography visually represented in the film by a plywood scenario in a poor ballroom in the Portuguese capital, is indirectly portrayed through the demonstration of the Timorese cultural and historical traditions (music, dance, costumes), creating a filmic atmosphere that brings the country, its history, culture, and people to the fore while directing sharp criticism at the colonizer.

As a geographical location, East Timor stands among the farthest settlements of the Portuguese. In practical terms, this fact alone determined the relationship between the metropolis and the colonized territory — well into the twentieth century, Portugal being one of the few remaining European colonizers, it looked upon its old colony with something of an ashamed indifference. The medium feature film directed by Margarida Gil at the turn of the 1990s aims at overcoming that indifference by looking straight into the eyes of the Timorese

³ Interestingly, Shakespeare's play premiered in London in 1611, practically one century after Portugal colonized East Timor.

people then living as refugees in Lisbon. The then recent succession of events is summarized by journalist Adelino Gomes at the outset of the film just before the title, upon a world map showing that part of Asia with the camera zooming in on the island of Timor:

A Indonésia invadiu Timor-Leste em 7 de dezembro de 1975. A guerra e a fome mataram duzentas mil pessoas e a ilha tornou-se numa imensa prisão. Treze anos depois, num clima de generalizada indiferença internacional, guerrilheiros resistem ainda nas montanhas. [...] Cerca de quinze mil timorenses fugiram para o exterior. A maior parte ficou na Austrália. Para a antiga metrópole vieram dois mil. Vivem em condições difíceis em Setúbal e nos arredores de Lisboa, Cacém, Amadora, Queluz, e nas casas de madeira do Campo dos Balteiros, Vale do Jamor.

[Indonesia invaded East Timor on 7 December 1975. War and famine killed 200,000 people turning the island into a gigantic prison. Thirteen years after that, among generalized international indifference, guerrilla people still resist in the mountains. [...] Some 15,000 Timorese people fled abroad. The majority settled in Australia; two thousand came to the former metropolis, where they dwell in dire conditions in Setúbal and in the outskirts of Lisbon — Cacém, Amadora, Queluz, and in the wooden sheds at Campo dos Balteiros, Vale do Jamor.]

In 1989, Campo dos Balteiros (or 'Quinta do Balteiro') in Vale do Jamor, one of the districts in the metropolitan area of Lisbon, was still home to a significant community of Timorese refugees. Margarida Gil chose this community to locate and symbolize the Timorese people, represented as living in the land of and among the former colonizer. Adopting a hybrid tone between fiction and documentary, Gil's approach to the Timorese community alternates between anthropologically documenting the habits of the individuals living in Vale do Jamor and following a fictional plot centred on a young refugee about to leave for Timor to join the guerrillas and his younger brother who looks up to him as a hero — all sustained by dramatic dialogues which include Timorese chanting, food recipes, sports rules, traditional verse, and even lines from the work of the Portuguese poet Ruy Cinatti (who started his poetic opus after his holidays spent in the former colonies in 1935). Most of this linguistic material is in Portuguese, but Tétum makes its occasional appearance to underline relevant narrative points. The language of the colonizer is paradoxically perceived by the Timorese as a symbol of resistance vis-à-vis the Indonesian invader.⁴ Timor and the Timorese are thus audiovisually represented as a culture, a synthesis of historic events understood and literally seen by the camera of a Portuguese in Portuguese territory. Historical paradoxes — in which the first colonizer is

⁴ For more information on this, see Geoffrey Gunn's article on language and the construction of East Timor's identity, as well as Taur Matan Ruak's note on the importance of the Portuguese language for the East Timorese resistance: Geoffrey Gunn, 'Língua e Cultura na construção da identidade de Timor-Leste', *Revista Camões*, 14 (2001), 14–24; Taur Matan Ruak, 'A importância da língua portuguesa na resistência contra a ocupação indonésia', *Revista Camões*, 14 (2001), 40–41.

the documented protector but symbolically presented both as guardian and as offender — come up in a succession throughout the film, only to stress the harshness and absurdity of all colonialisms.

The East Timorese appear in the film dislocated from their homeland, attempting to make themselves at home in the land of the first occupier, but hardly succeeding. José de Matos-Cruz recalls that the title of the film is 'o nome de um ritual timorense que simboliza o tempo em que a alma se separa do corpo' [the name of an East Timorese ritual symbolizing the period when the soul separates from the body].⁵ A poem collected by Fernando Pires and Emanuel Braz in East Timor establishes the dichotomy between 'sweet' and 'bitter' flowers, and reveals their interchangeability. The sweet flower 'goes on the grave' and is the 'food for the souls | Of those departed'; it becomes sweet 'When prepared by the hands | Of women who chew betel nut | And remember the loved one | Laid to rest'. The bitter flower 'is the Flower | That goes on the grave | On the seventh day | The sign of sorrow | For those who stay'. The former is an offering to the dear departed and 'marks the beginning | Of the time to let go | To hold on to the memory | To let go of the grief'; but in the end 'Bitter is the flower | That becomes sweet' and 'Sweet is the Flower | When the soul is at rest'.⁶

Bitterness is mostly felt by those who stay and mourn their dead. In Margarida Gil's film, the presence of the East Timorese soul — represented by those who survived and by their memories of the ones who fell — can only be suggested, always in search of its embodiment, but frustrated at the fact that it cannot find it where the body dwells. Some ten minutes before the end of the film (at 00:44:45), a young woman talks to a young man about to leave to fight in East Timor. She asks him why he wants to leave and he replies: 'Porque não tenho nada a ver com isto' [Because I have nothing to do with this here]. As she responds 'Nem eu — nenhum de nós' [Nor me — nor any of us], the camera turns to a young boy, Angelino, leaving the scene and stretching the argument to its paroxysm: 'Ninguém tem nada a ver com isto' [Nobody has anything to do with this]. Yet, the fact is they need to remain, as the young man affirms: 'Mas vão ficando — quantos anos queres ficar? Uns dez? Vinte?' [And yet one stays — how many years do you want to stay? Maybe ten? Twenty?]; and the woman replies: 'Os que forem necessários' [As many as necessary].

The forced indirectness of the representation of the East Timorese people turns *Bitter Flowers* into a film which is as much about that distant people as it is about Portugal's awareness of its place and role among them, their society, their past, and their culture. In a sense, the camera acts as the Portuguese gaze onto a people once subdued by Portugal, which now perceives the richness of

⁵ José de Matos-Cruz, 'Timor e o cinema', *Revista Camões*, 14 (2001), 162–71 (p. 168).

⁶ Richard Tanter, Mark Selden and Stephen R. Shalom (eds), *Bitter Flowers, Sweet Flowers: East Timor, Indonesia, and the World Community*, War and Peace Library (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), p. v.

their culture and the sheer injustice of colonialism. The viewer never totally faces the *otherness* of the East Timorese other, but rather stands at the threshold of its representation, as an uninvited guest who has prepared a meal and wishes to join the celebration. This is one possible reading of the many images of thresholds and doors ajar which punctuate the film; or the reason Margarida Gil chose to film so often in *plongée* shots, directing the camera towards the bare feet or the shoes of the East Timorese.

After Adelino Gomes' voice has narrated the short history of Timor and the camera has stopped at the mapped area above Australia, what appears on the screen is a natural setting of exuberant vegetation: with no internal evidence so far, the viewer could imagine herself within the mountains of East Timor. Indeed, the information needed to identify the location is not given at the start (Lisbon is vaguely mentioned, and the roar of Formula 1 engines suggests the vicinity of the Estoril Circuit); just as the names of characters and the kinship among them will only be explained to the spectator progressively through the film. By choosing to shoot the exterior scenes mostly at night and surrounded by this exuberant, virtually exotic vegetation — and by working the soundtrack to stress the wild trait of the *locus* — Margarida Gil tries to re-enact the environment of the remote mountains of East Timor at Quinta do Balteiro in Oeiras, Portugal. The same is attempted with the illustration of the Timor mountains as backdrop for the stage in the ballroom where a great portion of the plot unfolds. This displaced, wild landscape, the film seems to suggest, is the locus of memories; it is the abode of beauty, of passion, of family bonding and of trans-generational communication. Very near the end, a group of four girls recites a chanted charm about the land and the country:

[1^a] Vi a mãe ao pé do berço, por isso sei o que é o amor. Vi os olhos infantis, por isso sei o que é a fé.

[2^a] Contemplei um arco-íris, por isso sei o que é beleza. Olhei o mar agitado, por isso sei o que é o poder.

[3^a] Uma árvore plantei, por isso sei o que é a esperança. Ouvi as aves silvestres, já sei o que é a liberdade.

[4^a] Perdi um amigo, por isso sei o que é a dor. Lutei e matei na guerra, por isso sei o que é o inferno.

[Todas] Vimos e sentimos tudo isto porque sabemos que deus é o poder, amor, fé, esperança de Timor na luta pela sua liberdade.

[[First girl] I have seen the mother beside the baby's crib; therefore, I know what love is. I have seen the eyes of a child; therefore, I know what faith is.

[Second girl] I have contemplated a rainbow; therefore, I know what beauty is. I have gazed at the wild sea; therefore, I know what might is.

[Third girl] A tree I have planted; therefore, I know what hope is. I have heard the forest fowl; I already know what freedom is.

[Fourth girl] I have lost a friend; therefore, I know what pain is. I have fought and killed in the war; therefore, I know what hell is.

[All] We have seen and felt all this because we know that God is the might, the love, the faith, and the hope of Timor in its plight for freedom.]

This chant occurs outside, next to the gigantic roots of a tree, which — together with the children reciting it — suggests the ideal rooting of a solid will, the force of desiring a free, sovereign nation. It would take over a decade after the film was completed for that dream to become true for East Timor, but it is definitely significant that this idea is so enduringly imprinted on Margarida Gil's work as a message to the future.

The wilderness is, however, also the place of battle and that of death: this much is hinted at from the outset of *Bitter Flowers*, when the scene opens in broad daylight into a courtyard where men in East Timorese costumes attend a cockfight between two roosters, and place financial bets (it is only following the images of this fight that the title of the film is shown, and the narrative, so to speak, is set forth). It will be outdoors too, among the dusky atmosphere and vegetation, after Angelino descends from the tree where he was perched looking over at the events happening just outside the ballroom door, that he will fight the Portuguese 'devil' and be killed. The blood shed by the angelic boy will add to the river of blood shed by the East Timorese throughout history in the confrontation with occupants of the territory — eerily, Angelino's death anticipates the Santa Cruz Massacre in East Timor on 12 November 1991, a violent shooting by Indonesian forces who killed mostly pro-independence young men demonstrating in the Santa Cruz cemetery after a funeral mass celebrating Sebastião Gomes, a young member of the resistance movement. In the character of Angelino, *Bitter Flowers* signifies all bloodshed in fights for independence; in the evil Portuguese drunkard, it symbolizes all cowards (the man runs away upon realizing he has killed the boy), all prejudiced people (in many scenes the drunkard directs offensive remarks at a young woman's boyfriend). When he is thrown out of the ballroom by another Portuguese, he keeps insulting the others with foul words, calling them 'whores, fags, and *monhés*' (an offensive word used by Portuguese to designate Hindus). Meanwhile the good Portuguese barman is heard saying that 'Mauberes are princes', but the drunkard shouts 'S*** to the Mauberes!'). This Portuguese devil represents the injustice of oppressors, as he comes to the dance uninvited, drinks separately, and is cruelly — even fatally — unthankful. He is Prospero turned into Caliban.

The interiors, in turn, appear in the film predominantly in four specific spaces. The ballroom, where a collective celebration is taking place, is divided into three main areas: the bar, the disc-jockey's mixing table, and the stage with the painted scenario, which gains narrative relevance in the course of the film. Some scenes show those attending the ball laughing, or simply sitting on chairs by the walls. The scenes set in these areas provide the bulk of the

documentary elements of the film: the camera stands mostly still, observing and showing; the gaze assumes itself as anthropological, with no intervention or comment. The context of the dance is also where the medium feature film takes a metafilmic stance, from 00:16:06 until 00:16:17, when the boy preparing the dance floor points a light projector onto Domingas, stressing not just the attention he is offering her, but also the particularly tender gaze Margarida Gil dedicates her and other women throughout the feature: the feminine figures represent hope, the smiles of a future free land. Women gather and cook in the kitchen, passing on their ancient ways (and criticizing the Portuguese produce while at it). Antonio's bedroom, another significant indoor space, has a notable window that works as a door to Angelino — as an angel, he does not tread on the floor but is often on a higher spatial level. This bedroom will serve as a changing room for Domingas, as she enters it carrying a dress just woven by an older woman in another room of the building while a puppy plays around. The camera shows the young woman entering the bedroom where Lio is lying and smoking. The girl smiles at him and opens a folding screen behind which she will put on the dress. The scene is filled with erotic innuendo: the girl's dressing gestures are merely suggested by her going behind the screen while the spectator is shown the opposite side of the room, and the camera, located in the place of the folded screen, zooms in towards the young man's body and face smoking a cigarette and looking lewdly as the camera approaches (as if he were imagining the woman's body being undressed), and the rustle of the clothes and of the ornaments of the dress being put on is heard. This is one of the most intimate moments in the film, the indoors accentuating the intimacy between the two figures. When the girl comes out from behind the screen, beautifully clad in the newly woven red dress, her arms adorned with the typical East Timorese armband and her neck with necklaces, she asks the young man to help her hold her hair and complete the figurine with a metal head band. The romantic sound of a guitar is the only musical score, along with the noises of forest fowl — the moment is interrupted by Angelino, reality breaking in through the voice of an angel peeping in from the upper internal window, telling him: 'Lio, vai-te embora. Já estão à tua espera [Lio, go away. They are waiting for you].

The precarious housing of Quinta do Balteiro (shacks made of thin brick, wood, and zinc sheets, lacking infrastructure, as suggested by the girl collecting water in a plastic jar as the title of the film appears) harbours the miserable living conditions. But it is also indoors that the apparently harsh aggression of pop music coexists with the folk dances and harmonies of the distant land. Clear paths, as transitions between outside and inside, are walked through during the day by the Timorese — they relay moments of inter-generational learning. In turn, a barely perceptible road leads a van into the main house bringing in it 'the devil' who will 'ruin the ball'. Out of this van come two Portuguese: one is introduced to the community and to the spectator as an 'irmão de sangue' [blood brother], since he celebrated a blood pact with one of

the outstanding members of the Timorese group; the other appears as a ‘devil’, someone who will bring disgrace into the community. As the two go inside, the ‘good’ Portuguese brings beer and joyfully salutes and is greeted by all; the second, the ‘bad’ one, chooses to stay out of the beer toast and drinks spirits instead — throughout the film, his presence is accompanied by ominous music that increases in intensity up to the tragic end he causes.

With a careful *dispositio* of its narrative elements, *Bitter Flowers* can be read as an allegory. The story is even served with a character representing the *anima* of the group, and someone who reinforces the link between generations and different cultures: Angelino, who speaks both Portuguese and Tétum. Early in the film he is wearing Western clothes, chatting outside and sharing a smoke with a friend who would rather attend the Formula 1 races heard roaring in the distance than the Timorese cockfights — ‘Não sei porque é que o sangue entusiasma tanto as pessoas. A mim isso não me diz nada’ [I don’t know why blood excites people so much. It doesn’t doing anything for me], he says — but eventually Angelino changes into traditional East Timorese attire as his speech incorporates folk chanting, becoming more and more symbolic. He idolizes the young man preparing to leave for Timor, calling him a hero, and wishing to be like him. Angelino is the one coming through Lio’s bedroom window and asking him to become his brother: ‘Quero ser teu irmão. Pacto de sangue’ [I want to be your brother. A blood pact]. The older boy replies that he is but a child: ‘Um pacto é para sempre’ [A pact is forever]. Angelino then draws a blade and repeats the request. The ceremony between the two is accompanied by the two reading lines from a poem Ruy Cinatti translated, duly entitled ‘Poema do pacto de sangue’ [Poem of the Blood Pact].⁷

This conviviality of poetry with film is a recurrent feature in Margarida Gil’s works. As the camera draws closer to the boys, they settle the pact dropping

⁷ The poem appears as ‘translated by Ruy Cinatti, Portugal/Timor’ in an anthology organized by poet Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen, who explains: ‘Durante uma das suas estadas em Timor, Ruy Cinatti celebrou um pacto de sangue com o chefe de uma linhagem timorense. Por isso, daí em diante, segundo os usos e tradições de Timor, passou ele próprio a ser simultaneamente português e timorense, facto que nunca esquecia’ [During one of his sojourns in Timor, Ruy Cinatti made a blood pact with the leader of a Timorese lineage. Therefore, from then on and according to the Timorese tradition Cinatti became both Portuguese and Timorese, a fact he never forgot] (p. 168). The poem represents the bond among people by way of ‘um lenço velho’ [an old scarf]: ‘Nobres há muitos. É verdade. / Verdade. Homens muitos. É muito verdade. / Verdade que com um lenço velho / As nossas mãos foram enlaçadas. // Nós, como aliados, eu digo. / Panos, só um, tal qual afirmo. / A lua ilumina o meu feitio. / O sol ilumina o aliado. // Água de Héler! Pelo vaso sagrado! / Nunca esqueça isto o aliado. / Juntos, combater, eu quero! / Com o aliado, derrotar, eu quero! // A lua ilumina o meu feitio. / O sol ilumina o aliado. / Poderemos, talvez, ser derrotados / Ou combatidos, mas somente unidos. [There are many noblemen. That much is true. / True. Men so many. So very true. / So true that with one old scarf / Our hands have been bound. // We as many allied, I say. / Cloths, only one as I affirm. / The moon shines over my character. / The sun illuminates the allied. // Héler’s water! Through the sacred vase! / May the allied never forget that. / Together, to combat I will! / With the allied to defeat I will! // The moon shines over my character. / The sun illuminates the allied. / We might perhaps be defeated / Or fought, but solely united.] (my translation). Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen (ed.), *Primeiro livro de poesia: poemas em língua portuguesa para a infância e a adolescência* (Lisbon: Caminho, 1997), p. 168.

blood from incisions they make on each other's forearms with a blade. Angelino looks straight into the camera while Lio pronounces the last words of the poem, first in Portuguese and afterwards in Tétum. The next image shows the two making a cross with their overlapping forearms and exchanging blood. At the end of the film, Angelino's death brought about by a fight with the 'bad' Portuguese stands for the loss of innocence of a strongly bonded people subdued by centuries-long oppression.

Bitter Flowers sways elegantly from a documentary to a poetic elegy for the East Timorese people, precisely in the historical moment when the people of East Timor organize themselves and unilaterally declare their independence from the Indonesian occupier.⁸ In a brief subsequent shot the spectator sees the girl peeping into the scene through a door ajar. At 00:33:19 spectators are taken back into the dance saloon: to the sound of Timorese pop music, two women — one of them the young woman who had just put on her new red folk dress — and two girls dance onstage with the painted image of the Timor mountains behind them. Joy and hope stand before the beautiful but cardboard landscape of East Timor.

Before that, the dance had been interrupted by a communal, political moment. It is a moment in which the film is undecided as to whether the images are documented or fictional, but clearly takes the stand of the Timorese, accompanying them in their plight. A man who appears to be a leader interrupts Bruce Springsteen's 'Dancing in the Dark' to announce that one of them is leaving Portugal for East Timor to fight the Indonesian occupant. Leaving for the guerrilla is a sort of dance in the darkness of war: 'Meus caros compatriotas: o Daniel vai estar mais perto de Timor. Vai estar a lutar' [My dear compatriots, Daniel is leaving to be closer to Timor. He will be fighting]. The speech continues, as the speaker urges those remaining on Portuguese soil to join the fight using whatever means can be used from afar: 'Mas nós cá fora também lutamos: temos outras armas, outros meios, outras formas de combater; nós lutamos contra a indiferença, lutamos contra o silêncio, contra o esquecimento, contra o espírito do deixa andar. Esta é a nossa forma de lutar, não nos esqueçamos disto, meus irmãos e minhas irmãs de Timor' [But we over here can struggle too: we have other weapons, other means, other forms of fighting; we fight against indifference, we fight against silence, against forgetfulness, against the spirit of leaving things as they are. This is our way of fighting, let's not forget this, my brothers, and my sisters of Timor]. The music that ensues is East Timorese folk accompanied by women dancing and preparing food in the kitchen, establishing a contrast with the idea of preparing to fight. All the while, and in agreement with the evil idea of fighting, the 'bad' Portuguese

⁸ For a chronology (albeit incomplete, as the author himself recognizes) of events leading to the proclamation and international acknowledgement of East Timor as an independent, sovereign state, see A. Barbedo de Magalhães, 'Timor-Leste: tenacidade, abnegação e inteligência política', *Revista Camões*, 14 (2001), 26–39.

keeps drinking his *grappa*, feeding his sour soul, and getting ready to spark a fight. When a Timorese man accidentally bumps into him and apologizes, saying he did not mean it, the Portuguese replies offensively — he is a topsy-turvy Caliban, the figure of the former colonizer now represented as the indigenous so often were deemed by the Europeans. An interlude song is heard over this scene (from 00:22:58 to 00:24:43): it is Peter Tosh's reggae theme 'Johnny B. Goode', lingering even after the shot changes towards the ballroom door — it is an intermediate theme, from a genre combining traits of Western pop culture with Afro beats which converged in Jamaican culture. But right afterwards, folk drums bring back Timorese resonances while women and men dance in folk attire, one of them (which suggests it is Daniel, the warrior-to-be) wearing traditional warrior costume. In the back, a rooster crows; the painted scenario is a permanent reminder of the mountains of Timor — a surrogate for the place where indeed the East Timorese guerrillas are hiding and fighting off, or getting ready to fight off, the Indonesians. Right after this, someone reads a message from Timor with the 'notícias amargas' [bitter news] of 'os filhos de Timor que caíram ontem pela nossa terra [the sons of Timor who fell for our land], and a long list follows, with names of men, younger and older, of their places of origin, of the children they are survived by, 'barbaramente assassinado[s] pelo ocupante' [barbarously assassinated by the occupant] (00:27:10). At this point, Margarida Gil's camera speaks through zooms and selective focus, indicating a language which associates the crescendo of war preparation with the names of the dead, to the head of the rooster in the cockfight, and finally to the face of the East Timorese folk dressed up to fight. Battle is always lurking underneath the festive atmosphere of the narrative; goodbyes and separation are the counterpart of love-making and the joy of living; sweet and bitter flowers sway in a permanent meditation on the dead. As is pronounced early in the film (see 00:07:48–00:07:53), 'Ninguém ri em Díli — ninguém ri em Lisboa' [Nobody laughs in Díli — nobody laughs in Lisbon].

Similarly to other works by this director, music is not taken as a mere presence in *Bitter Flowers*, but it acts as a relevant narrative element. Alongside the documental and symbolic role played by East Timorese folk songs and chants, and the contrast they are given by Western pop (in one of the boys' rooms the camera shows a poster of Elvis Presley), in *Bitter Flowers* one particular score underlines the artistic, fruitful, even beautiful connection between the East Timorese and the Portuguese, between former colonized and colonizer: the song 'Ai, Timor' composed by João Gil, brother of the director. In the film, it is performed by a choir of East Timorese children and young people, and the spectator perceives both the humming and the words in Tétum. The composition would afterwards acquire symbolic relevance when it became an anthem elegy for those who fell at Santa Cruz cemetery in 1991. In the lyrics written for that occasion by João Gil's group 'Trovante' outside the context of the film, a line stands out which points to the song itself as well as at the role

the film played in reminding the Portuguese of this faraway, forsaken people: 'Se outros calam, cantemos nós' [If others are silent, let us sing]. *Bitter Flowers* echoes the beginning of this singing, the breaking of a long, unfair silence.

The film is clearly on the side of the East Timorese as it shows the urge of its refugees to go back and fight for independence. However, it does not romanticize or glorify the fight. In the scene before the death of Angelino, the boy comes into the room through the window and asks his brother if he is leaving. The answer is an affirmative nod, and Angelino verbalizes the brother's motives as he pleads to the brother to take him along: 'António, leva-me contigo' [António, take me with you]. But the brother gives Angelino a reality shock, telling him he is wrong in thinking he is a hero.

Ouve, Angelino: tu talvez tenhas ficado com uma ideia errada sobre mim. Tu pensas que eu sou um herói. Um herói como nos filmes de cowboys. Mas não sou. A guerra não faz heróis. A guerra não distingue nada. Mata — mata tudo. Mata por bala. Mata por fome. Mata por doença. Que bom, Angelino — que sorte a tua, que não sabes o que é a guerra. Mas eu tinha a tua idade e fui apanhado por ela. [...] Não sabia o que era ter medo. Ter fome. Ver morrer os camaradas, a irmã, a mãe e o irmão pequenino.

Se fosse agora, oferecias-te?

Sim. Não sei. Agora já sei demais.

[Listen, Angelino: maybe you've got a wrong idea about me. You think that I am a hero. A hero like in the cowboy films. But I'm not. War doesn't make heroes. It kills — kills everything. It kills with bullets. It kills with hunger. It kills with disease. You're lucky, Angelino — you're lucky you don't know what war is. But when I was your age I was taken by it. [...] I didn't know what it was to be afraid. To be hungry. To see my comrades die, my sister, my mother and my little brother.

If it was now, would you volunteer?

Yes. I don't know. Now I know too much.]

Actually, he says, he agreed to go to war because he had seen his family slaughtered but at present he no longer knows if he would, as war makes no heroes.

As António walks off the frame, the camera stands still. In the following scene his fiancée shows a gloomy face and looks away, her beautiful dark eyes receiving what little light is left and the rest of her features dimmed. António's silhouette passes in front of the scenario with the painted mountains and he leaves the frame at the right side as the camera zooms into the plywood landscape and a rooster's crow is heard announcing the dawn. A huge tree root and trunk in the early morning is the last shot and it seems to herald a new day.

East Timor is revisited in Margarida Gil's filmic work nine years after *Bitter Flowers* in *O Anjo da Guarda* [*Guardian Angel*] (1998). In this feature film, a fiction made for the big screen, the Asian territory serves as a backdrop for the Freudian tribulations of Luísa, a psychiatrist mourning the recent suicide of her

father and going through her own midlife crisis. The dialogues of the film were written by the director and the writer Maria Velho da Costa. Timor is a faraway reference, the place where Luísa's father spent a relevant part of his life and one that he regrets not having shown her himself. After learning about her father's death, Luísa arrives home only to listen to his voice on the phone message recorder telling her how he would have wanted to point her a direction for living ('Gostaria de dizer-te "Vai para ali, para ali"' [I would like to tell you 'Go this way, that way']), or even to show her a free country ('gostaria de indicar-te um país livre'), which the spectator assumes is Timor, still occupied in 1998. The outcome of the father's wishes is annulled by his suicide; the outcome of the country's will to become a nation would take yet another four years.

Unable to retrieve or conjure up her father's presence, Luísa is left with his voice and with the film he shot in Timor, which she plays back alone in her apartment. Once more, the former colony is the realm of distance and longing — only this time as the irretrievable domain of a dead father, someone who represents the colonizer attempting to come to terms with his own existence (as colonizer?). The new Portugal which freed itself from a long dictatorship twenty-four years before the film premiered is somewhat like Luísa: reckoning the images of a former colony as the symbol of the loss of a father, grappling to keep a fragile emotional balance. In the film she eventually finds it in a relationship with a dying man who tends the roses in his garden: caring for one's private Eden offers a way to deal with one's traumatic past, the memory of which takes a long time to fade.

In the films of Margarida Gil, East Timor comes forth in a distanced, dislocated, disembodied image, inevitably through Western eyes. Whenever the living bodies of the East Timorese are indeed present and visible, as in *Bitter Flowers*, they dwell within an artificial, painted landscape. The refugee camp that shelters them and allows for their subsistence is ornamented with the illustration of the mountains but lacks the flame of the true communion with the land; rather, it is the people's longing to return to their island that sparks action. At the end of this television feature, when Angelino dies at the hands of the drunken Portuguese, the latter gets up and leaves, abandoning the lifeless boy. Another young man holds the dying boy, struggling to call his brother, and Angelino whispers when the latter arrives: 'Vais-te embora, não vais? Vai — eu vou logo ter contigo' [You are leaving, aren't you? Go — I will be joining you soon]. He then succumbs. The camera stands still as the brother walks off the frame, leaving Angelino behind: the body of Timor laid to rest in a foreign land, but its soul departed to the Asian island.

Otherwise, in *Guardian Angel*, the idea of the East Timorese people is transmitted through a voice (of someone unwillingly representing the former colonizer) coming from beyond the world of the living. It is an image of the people in the force of their soul and its manifestation; the image of a country on the verge of establishing itself as a free, independent nation, which founds

its independence on cultural traditions and political will. These images may be conveyed verbally (through poetry and song lyrics, or in the voice of the dead father of *Guardian Angel*), through movement (the ritualistic dances), or in the visuality of the plywood landscape scenario. In *Bitter Flowers*, a film made (produced, directed, photographed, composed) by Portuguese but performed mostly by East Timorese, all these symbols, tokens of a soul, come forward to compose the full body of a country through its individuals. In Margarida Gil's TV film, the people of East Timor are characterized as a homogeneous and relatively tight-knit group who dwell away from home and revive the habits and traditions of the geographically distant homeland but seem to accept the welcoming linguistic environment they share with and within the post-colonial metropolis (albeit in its dismal outskirts). Among a sense of zeal for cultural heritage and complex layers of domination, the film establishes a primarily human geography, based on gazes and facial expressions, in which the work of music, of shot direction, of light and shade plays a fundamental role.