Truth as Ideology in A Revolução de Maio

Patrícia I. Vieira
Georgetown University

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Abstract: In her article "Truth as Ideology in *A Revolução de Maio*" Patrícia I. Vieira analyses the different understandings of propaganda at work in the Portuguese New State. According to the leader of the regime, António de Oliveira Salazar, truth is self-evident and the role of propaganda is merely to convey truthful information to the citizens. Conversely, António Ferro, the first president of the government's National Secretary of Propaganda, suggested that truth is pliable and sees it as the task of propagandistic artworks to shape reality and to define the public's understanding of what is true and false. These contrasting views on the function of propaganda clash in the film *A Revolução de Maio* (1937) (The May Revolution), directed by António Lopes Ribeiro and produced by the National Secretary of Propaganda to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the revolution that led to the creation of the New State (Estado Novo). The friction produced by the juxtaposition of these divergent approaches to art and propaganda in the film allows us to identify some of the fissures in the ideological edifice of the regime.

Patrícia I. VIEIRA

Truth as Ideology in *A Revolução de Maio*

The Portuguese Estado Novo (New State) (1933-1974) was described frequently by its leader António de Oliveira Salazar as an apolitical regime. In his speeches, Salazar often equated the flurry of political activity that characterized the First Republic in Portugal with socio-economic disarray and his response to this chaos was "politics without politics" (unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine) ("política sem política" ["O Espírito da Revolução" 316]; Salazar spurned "democratic disorder." ("desordem democrática" ["Educação Política" 33]) and indicted political parties for constituting an alloy that conjugates mendacity and facts. According to his view, any multi-party system of government would be fraught necessarily with error since all political forces claimed the veracity of their doctrines, which could not be equally valid given their disparate and often contradictory agendas. Undergirding Salazar's condemnation of democracy is the conception of a unique and unified truth, the derision of which, in the squabbles of party politics, would only enervate the Nation. "Politics," which in Salazar's parlance connotes the vices of democracy thus had to be replaced by a stable political organization governed by truth.

Salazar portrayed truth as an unproblematic given, always associated with beauty and the good: "We believe that Truth, Justice, Beauty, and the Good exist; we believe that individuals and people become elevated, noble and worthy by cultivating these virtues." ("Cremos que existe a Verdade, a Justiça, o Belo e o Bem; cremos que pelo seu culto os indivíduos e os povos se elevam, enobrecem, dignificam" ["Para Servir de Prefácio" xxiv]). These qualities, presented here in a framework close to that of Platonic ideas, are considered to be self-evident. José Gil points out that, in his speeches, Salazar employed a "rhetoric without rhetoric." ("retórica sem retórica") since the veracity of his statements should be so clear that the audience would not need to be convinced of it through artifice ("Para Servir de Prefácio" 8). When the statesman propounds faith, nation, authority, family, and work as the pillars of his government, he emphasizes the fact that these tenets are not up for discussion (see "Grandes Certezas" 130). Rather, they hypostatize a panacea for the country's crisis, whose validity is beyond doubt. Salazar thus postulated the existence of an immutable truth, which is the measure of all social and political values and respect for this truth will lead necessarily to the good, i.e., to a stable and prosperous society.

Although Salazar underscored the obviousness of truth, its perspicuity can sometimes be muddled by the deleterious effects of lack of information or by misinterpretations. It is the task of any political regime to debunk lies and steer the public in the direction of veracity. In the New State, this is the incumbency of propaganda: "Some will consider propaganda to be a subtle instrument that unites contributions from science and the arts ... and changes colors, disfigures facts ... *thus creating a truth* so clear, so incisive, so obvious that everyone will take it for truthful. ... that is not the meaning of propaganda for us. What is it, then? Every time I have touched upon this matter, I have linked propaganda to the political education of the Portuguese people and I have attributed two functions to it: first, information, then, political instruction." ("Alguns ainda considerarão a propaganda como o instrumento subtil que, recolhendo todos os contributos da ciência e da arte ... transmuda cores, desfigura os factos ... *cria uma verdade*, tão clara, tão incisiva, tão evidente, que todos a hão-de julgar verdadeira. ... não é isso para nós a propaganda. O que é, pois? Sempre que abordei este assunto tenho ligado a propaganda à educação política do povo português e lhe tenho atribuído duas funções -- informação primeiro; formação política, depois" [Salazar, "Necessidade da Propaganda" 195]).

Salazar dismissed the idea that propaganda would present a tendentious view of reality and categorized it as information and political education. As he often pointed out, political actualities are not facts but what the people know about: "Politically, the only thing that exists is what the public knows that it exists." ("Politicamente, só existe o que o público sabe que existe" ["Propaganda Nacional" 259]). There is thus an imbalance between reality and society's perception of it and the role of propaganda is to bridge this gap and divulge the truth. In order to centralize propaganda efforts, the National Secretary of Propaganda (SNP: Secretariado de Propaganda Nacional) was created on 25 September 1933 and António Ferro, a leading intellectual and a sympathizer of Salazarism, was to be-

come the first president of the institution. In a speech given at the opening ceremony of the SNP, Salazar highlighted the fact that its main goal would be to fight "errors, lies, calumnies or simple ignorance, from within and from without" ("o erro, a mentira, a calúnia ou a simples ignorância, de dentro ou de fora" ["Propaganda Nacional" 264]) under the banner of truth and justice. In fact, Portugal's efforts of propaganda were directed on two fronts: external and internal. Part of SNP's mission was to disseminate a positive image of the country abroad, which it did mainly through an investment in the infrastructure of tourism, the translation of works on the policies of the New State and the participation in international exhibitions (see Paulo 75-76). But most of the institution's resources were channeled to internal matters and some of its functions were in the control of the press and the organization of demonstrations in support of the government and the funding of national(istic) artistic creations. Cinema also belonged to the areas of the function of the SNP. The organization financed 114 short films, many of which were documentaries, and was directly responsible for the production 39 of these (see Paulo 81). It fostered equally the creation of feature-length films, mostly dealing with historical figures or with aspects of popular culture. The film *A Revolução de Maio* (1937) (The May Revolution) was the only propaganda feature film of fiction produced entirely by the SNP: it was created to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the 28 May Revolution that instituted the New State and its director, António Lopes Ribeiro, was one of the filmmakers of the time who endorsed overtly the ruling authorities. The production transposes Salazar's assertions on truth and propaganda into a cinematic form. It is a substantiation of the dictator's depiction of his government's values as apodictically true, good, and just. However, it equally shows the tensions within the dictatorship, as well as the cracks in its dogma, and through these breaches in totalitarian propaganda one gets a glimpse of the ideology it strove to disseminate:

Figure 1: Poster advertising *A Revolução de Maio*. © by Permission of Cinemateca Portuguesa

Luís Reis Torgal identifies conversion as a crucial trope in the cultural production of the New State and, particularly, in its propaganda films. This is instantiated in *A Revolução de Maio*, as its plot revolves around the transformation of the main character, César Valente (António Martinez), from a believer in communism into a fervent supporter of Salazar's totalitarianism. Several events contribute to this alteration, among which is his romantic involvement with a girl whose father had died defending the regime. However, his change is owing mostly to the realization that, in the years when he was absent from Portugal, the country had undergone a speedy process of development. One of the first steps towards César's conversion is a sequence that depicts a visit to the National Institute of Statistics. It begins with a shot of the protagonist, alone in the middle of a large square and facing a grandiose staircase surrounded by a group of newly built edifices. The redoubtable magnificence of the site appears to stand for the power of the current political system and humanity's insignificance in the midst of the architecture reveals the futility of any attempt to overthrow it. Already inside the building, César goes through data about the current situation of Portugal and verifies that, according to the statistics, everything had improved, from an increase in exports and the extinction of public debt to widespread aid to mothers and children. This scene is built by crosscutting the numbers unearthed in the Institute and a conversation of two men in a café, who are engaged in deriding the government's policies. After every piece of criticism there is a cut to statistical data that denies that affirmation, so as to highlight the mendacity of the comments. This section of the movie illustrates Salazar's words about the SNP: "It [the Secretary of Propaganda] should remain strictly close to facts and preferably use images and numbers as the most forceful and eloquent expressions of public life." ("Ele o Secretariado de Propaganda] deve cingir-se estritamente aos factos e utilizar de preferência a imagem e o número como as expressões mais eloquentes dos factos da vida pública" ["Propaganda Nacional" 262]). In the sequence, numbers are allowed to speak for themselves. Truth is something apparent and, having access to information, all men of good will, like César, should inevitably convert to the values of Salazarism:

Figure 2: César in front of the National Institute of Statistics. © by permission of Cinemateca Nacional

The May Revolution was filmed during the period of the Spanish civil war, at a time when communism posed a palpable threat to the Portuguese government. In his speeches, Salazar often refers to leftist ideas as pernicious doctrines that infiltrate and poison society ("Necessidades da Propaganda" 204-05), and the movie therefore functions as a denunciation of these lies. The main character's initial plan is to overthrow the regime in order to establish communism in the country and one of his compeers is the Russian Dimoff (Eliezer Kamenesky), hence suggesting a Soviet connection. As the action unfolds, the advantages of the current situation are progressively unveiled and he ends up yielding to the virtues of the state in a poignantly nationalistic scene where, instead of raising the red banner of communism, he salutes the Portuguese flag. In the morning of 28 May 1936, ten years after the military coup that instituted Salazarism, the protagonist of the film completed his metamorphosis, surveyed by a benign political police who, instead of arresting him, gave him time to recant his errors. César surrenders to the obvious veracity of New State values and becomes a new man, thus embodying the notion that truth is self-evident:

Figure 3: *A Revolução de Maio* (César and his associates, including the Russian Dimoff dressed in white). © by Permission of Cinemateca Portuguesa

The idea of truth as defended by Salazar encapsulates a paradox that was exacerbated by propaganda creations such as *A Revolução de Maio*. For if the veracity of the regime's principles is evident, it should always shine through whatever lies were fabricated to obfuscate it. The necessity of propaganda proves that the Salazarist version of the truth was far from hegemonic and unwittingly acknowledges the power of divergent takes on reality. It manifests the instability of the dictator's rule and testifies to the fact that many would not convert to the virtues of the New State. Salazar's posing of his government's tenets as universally truthful is just another propaganda device, created in order to persuade public opinion that there were no alternatives to the status quo.

Salazar considered that artistic creations had a didactic function and condemned the notion of art for art's sake ("Para Servir de Prefácio" xxii). The value of artworks such as *A Revolução de Maio* is based on the efficaciousness of their presentation of the truth, which was paralleled with his political agenda. The dictator espoused the Platonic view that artistic endeavors are devoid of any inherent validity and should only aspire at serving as vehicles for ideas that lay outside them. António Ferro, president of the SNP and writer of the script of the film, together with António Lopes Ribeiro, had a somewhat divergent approach to the arts that also transpires in the film. Ferro was the architect of the "Politics of the Spirit," which, following the model of Italian fascism, conflated art and reality: "Men of action, guiding figures and leaders are wrong when they despise or forget the fine arts and literature, attributing to these a decorative function, a superfluous role, and reducing them to a sort of desert of social life. ... Let there be a politics of the spirit, intelligent and constant, consolidating discoveries and lending them height, significance and eternity. Let us not consider the spirit as a fantasy, as a vague and unworthy idea but rather as a well-defined, concrete and necessary presence, as an indispensable weapon for our rebirth" ("Enganam-se os homens de acção, os orientadores, os governantes, que desprezam ou esquecem as belas-artes e a literatura, atribuindo-lhes uma função meramente decorativa, um papel supérfluo, reduzindo-as a uma espécie de sobremesa da vida social. ... Mas que se faça uma Política do Espírito, inteligente e constante, consolidando a descoberta, dando-lhe altura, significado e eternidade. Que não se considere o espírito como uma fantasia, como uma ideia vaga, imponderável, mas como uma ideia definida, concreta, como uma presença necessária, como uma arma indispensável para o nosso ressurgimento" [Ferro, "Política do Espírito" 224]). Ferro does not deem art to be a transient manifestation of a truth that lies outside it, in the social or political realm. On the contrary, he argues here that the spirit and the artistic creations that nourish it are concrete facts that need to be accounted for by any political force.

António Pedro Pita, in an article that discusses Ferro's approach to film, argues for an interpretation of the intellectual's views on art that collates them with Oscar Wilde's. According to Pita, Ferro recognized that artworks are unfaithful to facts but believed their potential to reside precisely in their ability to lie. Artistic productions, and particularly cinema, constitute a reservoir of possibilities that anticipate and guide reality, since their fabulation is, in a way, truer than truth itself. It is life that should imitate art and not vice-versa (44-45). Propaganda creations such as *A Revolução de Maio* would therefore function not so much as a guide, aiding the public to recognize the veracity of principles pertaining to the existing government, but mainly as proleptic markers of a path yet to be trodden. In his article "O Ditador e a Multidão" Ferro discloses his understanding of propaganda: "The forced and necessary suppression of certain liberties and certain human rights needs to be sifted through happiness, enthusiasm and faith. Poor are the ideas without warmth; poor are ideas that do not glow" ("A supressão forçada, necessária, de certas liberdades, de certos direitos humanos, tem de ser coada através da alegria, do entusiasmo, da fé. Pobres das ideias sem calor, pobres das ideias que não crepitam" [217]). It is the role of propagandistic art to awaken in the public the ebullience that would make it welcome the policies of a totalitarian regime. For Ferro, these policies are not necessarily an expression of the truth. Rather, they will become true when contemplated through the mediating lenses of artistic creation.

In *A Revolução de Maio* enthusiastic adherence to the political situation is conveyed mainly through the use of documentary footage. The protagonist undertakes a trip to the north of the country in order to retrieve the weapons necessary for the coup through which he is planning to overthrow the government. This voyage to the heartland of rural Portugal coincides with the celebrations of 1 May and the fictional account of César's activities is interspersed with documentary images of a parade demonstrating in favor of Salazarist policies. The colorful decorations of the gathering and the liveliness of the participants contrast starkly with the somber mood in which the main character and his companion find themselves. Toward the end of the film, documentary footage is again presented in the form of images portraying the celebrations of the 10-year anniversary of the New State. The commemoration is first shown in Braga, where the crowd enthusiastically salutes Salazar and president Carmona. Already in Lisbon, César, now a vocal advocate of the current political situation, attends the demonstrations in favor of the ruling authority with Maria (Maria Clara). The film ends with documentary footage of the celebration in the city, to the words of a nationalistic tirade by Salazar:

Figure 4: Documentary footage used in *A Revolução de Maio* (Parade in support of the New State). © by Permission of Cinemateca Portuguesa

The plethora of documentary images displaying the crowd's fervent support of Salazar in *A Revolução de Maio* translates Ferro's statements about the role of propaganda art. These sequences are designed to generate the enthusiasm for the regime that, according to the president of the SNP, is key to the survival of any dictatorship. By watching a fictional motion picture displaying panegyric demonstrations in favor of the government, even the most recalcitrant Portuguese citizen would wish to submit to the beneficial authority of the New State. But the belief in the possibility of this transference from cinema to praxis presupposes that one embraces a view according to which life imitates art. The film depicts the way actuality should be and viewers should strive to approximate this picture. Documentary footage thus builds a bridge between factuality and the movie, in the crossing of which it undergoes a double shift. Documentary scenes, a representation of life, are first fictionalized by their insertion into the film and then re-introduced back into the world in variegated forms by the power of art to propagate itself in society. The outcome of this mutation is a transfiguration of reality itself, which is illuminated by its emulation of art:

Figure 5: Documentary footage used in *A Revolução de Maio* (President Óscar Carmona and Prime-Minister António de Oliveira Salazar). © by Permission of Cinemateca Portuguesa

The inclusion of documentary footage in *A Revolução de Maio* inscribes the recurrent use of a similar device in the propaganda created by other dictatorial governments of the time. In his article "Propaganda and the Nazi War Film," Siegfried Kracauer points out that many propagandistic German movies of the 1930s and 1940s employed extensively newsreel shots in scenes where staged material would have been more aesthetically effective. Kracauer contends that this technique was part of a maneuver to distort the real. If the nazis had been content with replacing existing actuality by another of their own, they might simply have resorted to staging. But in this process the image of actuality would not have been destroyed but merely banished, and it might continue to work subconsciously. Instead, they used reality, in the form of newsreels, to distort facts and to create the new pseudo-factuality of totalitarianism: "Reality was put to work faking itself, and exhausted minds were not even permitted to dream any longer" (Kracauer 299). Newsreels assimilated into fictional films aided the Nazis to absorb and modify factuality from within and conferred concreteness to the artificial ideology of the regime. This was precisely the technique employed in *A Revolução de Maio*, where sequences of documentary images contribute to the verisimilitude of the movie and to the artistic shaping of an idealized image of the New State and its citizens that should then be transposed into real life. Further, according to Kracauer, the objective of German propaganda films to underscore nazi virtues resulted frequently in the unveiling of their ruses. On the one hand, the films were often too assertive in their attempt to evince German superiority. On the other hand, unstaged images sometimes undermined the process of manipulation in which these films were engaged, since the distortion imposed upon newsreels became noticeable (see Kracauer 306-07). In *A Revolução de Maio* the abundance of documentary footage depicting the crowd's salutation of Salazar might lead the less gullible to question this emphasis. The excessive use of these images can be regarded as an attempt to mask the public's lack of support for the policies of the New State. Similarly, the inordinate benevolence of the political police in the movie blatantly cloaks the violent practices of this institution. Finally, César conversion to the ideology of the government suggests that there remained many other disbelievers who might nev-

er turn into proselytes. As Kracauer points out, the design of propagandistic films risked flipping into its opposite as the public recognized the failures of totalitarian regimes through the gaps in their very attempt to fashion themselves attractively by means of propaganda.

Ferro argues that a leader should appeal to the crowd, so as to merge with his public: "Let the dictator speak to the people and the people speak to him. Let the dictator and the people fuse in such a way that the people will feel that they are a dictator and the dictator will feel that he is the people" ("Que o ditador fale ao povo e que o povo lhe fale. Que ditador e povo se confundam de tal forma, que o povo se sinta ditador e que o ditador se sinta povo" ["Ditador e a Multidão" 219]). Ferro adumbrates here a psychoanalytic correlation between the people and their leader, which he considered essential for the success of a totalitarian government. Propaganda would be one of the ways to foster this recognition. Similarly, in his analysis of fascist propaganda, Theodor Adorno places psychoanalysis at the heart of nazi persuasion devices. In the wake of Freud's research on the mechanism of group psychology, Adorno postulates the existence of a libidinal bond between the masses and the dictator, who could be analogized with the primal father (136). The followers' surrender to this persona takes the form of identification resulting from a regression during which respect for the father turns into a wish to devour him and replace him as a power figure. This process explains why many dictators deviate from the towering figure of the father or the king of earlier times. Accordingly, one of the basic devices of personalized fascist propaganda is the concept of the "great little man," a person who suggests both omnipotence and the idea that he is just one of the folks ... The leader image gratifies the follower's twofold wish to submit to authority and to be the authority himself" (Adorno 142).

Posing as a common "great little man" enables the leader to function as a mirror in which the masses can see their reflection. The propaganda of modern dictatorships thus simultaneously satisfies individuals' desire to give in to omnipotent domination and their narcissistic urge to become masters. Adorno -- and later Kracauer -- believe that the phoniness inherent to fascist persuasion methods has the potential to unmask the deception of propaganda. Drawing on a parallelism between propagandistic methods and hypnosis, he expresses the hope that the public will become aware of the spell that entrapped them and renounce the thrall of totalitarianism. Psychoanalysis would play a decisive role in this process: "while psychology always denotes some bondage of the individual, it also presupposes freedom in the sense of a certain self-sufficiency and autonomy of the individual" (Adorno 151). If full emancipation from the heteronomous rule of the unconscious is an unattainable chimera, it is the task of each individual to strive toward an always incomplete autonomy (see Adorno 151-53).

In *A Revolução de Maio*, the appeal of the unconscious identified by Adorno as a prominent feature of propaganda, is mainly carried out through documentary footage. In these images Salazar is shown as a "great little man," who both emanates the simplicity of an everyman and the aura of an all-powerful authority figure. This becomes particularly obvious during the dictator's speeches, which are frequently reproduced in sound over while images of celebration appear on the screen, so as to convey his omnipresence. These sequences constitute an attempt to numb the public's understanding and to lure it into an irrational identification with the leader. However, it is mainly through reasoning that the main character converts to totalitarianism, since he recognizes the advantages of the New State. There are thus in the film two distinct approaches to persuasion that aim at reaching different audiences. The documentary images depicting demonstrations in favor of the government are supposedly addressed to the more credulous masses while the evidence testifying to the benefits of the ruling authority would speak to the more demanding community of New State skeptics.

The propagandist effort in *A Revolução de Maio* is torn between two different methods of persuasion associated with contending views on art. On the one hand, the film adheres to Salazar's notion of truth as transparent and of art as a vehicle for veracity. It therefore didactically guides the audience through a voyage where the various benefits of the policies of the New State are presented. Faced with this evidence, the public, like the protagonist, should turn into staunch believers in Salazarism. On the other hand, the movie follows Ferro's view of artworks as creators of a new reality that would be the model for everyday life. The grandiose demonstrations in favor of the government and the crowd's enthusiastic support thereof depicted through documentary images would thus be the artistic ideal that the Portuguese should emulate. Both Salazar's and Ferro's approaches to propaganda attest to the precariousness of the regime and their urgency to elicit public approval conspicuously signals

the lack thereof. Although the film features two digladiating positions on how to structure propaganda best, both approaches aim at transforming the public into believers in Salazarism either by appealing to reason or to the unconscious. Following the example of the main character César, who affirms that he is a changed man in the end of the film, all Portuguese ought to shed their old selves in order to become true citizens of the country. This transmutation echoes the process of interpellation by ideology as described by Louis Althusser in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." Much of the propaganda effort in *A Revolução de Maio* is geared toward persuading the audience that the protagonist only gained subject status by succumbing to the ruling authority. César was interpellated by the values of the regime and by espousing them he became a subject and a true human being. In the film, adherence to the government becomes a token of humanity, the implication being that there is no possible life outside of the New State. However, in spite of the film's propagandistic equation of subjection to Salazarism with appurtenance to mankind, the protagonist only replaces his socialist beliefs for totalitarianism. In this process he did not become a subject, since, in fact, he was one already. As Althusser points out, ideology is inescapable: "This ideology hails or interpellates individuals as subjects. As ideology is eternal, I must now suppress the temporal forming which I have presented the functioning of ideology, and say: ideology has always-already interpellated individuals as subjects, which amounts to making it clear that individuals are always-already interpellated by ideology as subjects, which necessarily leads us to one last proposition: individuals are always-already subjects" (119).

For Althusser, people are always ensnared in an ideological net. Therefore, propaganda's influence can work only to replace one ideology for another. In this framework, the goal of propagandistic art such as *A Revolução de Maio* is to persuade the public that one particular ideology, in this case that of the New State, is Ideology as such. Althusser emphasizes the similarities between Ideology and the unconscious, in that the two are necessary conditions of possibility for subject formation. Furthermore, both constitute the target of propaganda, which works on the unconscious so as to influence individuals' perception of themselves as subjects. Kracauer and Adorno argue that, through an increasing awareness of propaganda's persuasion devices, one might escape ideological ensnarement. Yet, for Althusser, the only way to overcome ideological constraints is to resort to science, where subjectivity becomes irrelevant (117). What *A Revolução de Maio* seems to suggest is the untenability of such a position. The film undoes the distinction between historical ideologies and timeless Ideology, in that the latter cannot be regarded as a free-floating structure but requires a content that the former represent. In the movie, the palpability of Ideology is materialized in different ideologies and the main character, on the threshold between two alternatives, opts for the totalitarian one. How could César's choice be inverted? Could one completely abrogate Ideology and the ideologies that comprise it? If an individual is always a subject, there is no escape from the perpetual loop of the ideological game. Still, as Althusser points out, the concretion of ideology(ies) is not a conflict-free environment (125). In conclusion, the New State propaganda of Portugal the traces of ideological struggle emerge in the interstices of Salazar's postulation of the regime as an incarnation of absolute truth and through the fissures of Ferro's manipulation of the masses to goad them into supporting the government. The incongruities in propaganda's ruses can thus constitute a point of departure for a resistance to the closed circle of ideology(ies), which does not originate outside it but in its very midst.

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Author's profile: Patrícia I. Vieira teaches Portuguese and Brazilian literature at Georgetown University. Her interests in scholarship include contemporary Portuguese, Brazilian, and Lusophone African literature and film, literature and philosophy, literary theory, and Lusophone postcolonialism. She is currently finishing a project on vision and visuality in political fiction and film in Portugal and Brazil. Vieira's recent publications include articles on postcolonial studies in Portugal and in Lusophone Africa, Portuguese feminist writing, Portuguese national identity and the Lusophone film in journals such as the *Luso-Brazilian Review*, *Brasil/Brazil*, *Portuguese Literary and Cultural Studies*, *Ellipsis* and *Dissidences*. E-mail: <piv2@georgetown.edu>