



Article

Mabata-Bata in Motion: The Transformation of Mia Couto's Narrative in Sol de Carvalho's Film

Lola Geraldine Xavier ^{1,2,*}, João Viana ³ and Silvie Špánková ⁴¹ Faculty of Languages and Translation, Macao Polytechnic University, Macao 999078, China² Coimbra Education School, Polytechnic Institute of Coimbra, 3030-329 Coimbra, Portugal³ Association of Film and Audiovisual Producers, 1050-088 Lisbon, Portugal; joaoviana@papaveronoir.com⁴ Department of Romance Languages and Literatures, Masaryk University, 602-00 Brno, Czech Republic; 8346@muni.cz

* Correspondence: lolaxavier@mpu.edu.mo

Abstract: This paper analyzes Mia Couto's short story "O dia em que explodiu Mabata-bata" [*The day Mabata-bata exploded*] and its adaptation by Sol de Carvalho's film *Mabata Bata*. Through an analysis of both versions, this study aims to understand how Couto's narrative was recreated and transfigured in the film adaptation. The film adaptation of the story employs a blend of images and additional text to extend the verbal dimensions of the original story, thus creating a new experience. It establishes affinities with the original story and introduces new elements that add to the narrative's depth and complexity. The adaptation of the story in the film provides an opportunity to examine the decolonial perspective of the nation's history, portraying the symbolic metamorphosis during the civil war (1977–1992). By analyzing both the short story and the film, this study highlights the pivotal role of literature and cinema in fostering a Mozambique "de-linking" identity through language, religion and traditions.

Keywords: Mia Couto; Sol de Carvalho; decolonial; civil war; Mozambique



Citation: Xavier, Lola Geraldine, João Viana, and Silvie Špánková. 2024.

Mabata-Bata in Motion: The Transformation of Mia Couto's Narrative in Sol de Carvalho's Film. *Humanities* 13: 46. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h13020046>

Received: 27 November 2023

Revised: 25 January 2024

Accepted: 28 February 2024

Published: 5 March 2024



Copyright: © 2024 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

If we consider, as Maldonado-Torres (2007, p. 243), that coloniality "refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administration", thus, coloniality persists beyond the era of colonization. It persists in books, academic achievement standards, cultural norms, shared understanding, people's self-perceptions, personal objectives, and other facets of our contemporary existence. Therefore, the search for decolonization as a project "aspires to break with monologic modernity" (Maldonado-Torres 2007, p. 261) and shows "oppositions to the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being" (Maldonado-Torres 2007, p. 261). According to this author, "the de-colonial turn involves interventions at the level of power, knowledge, and being through varied actions of decolonization and 'des-gener-acción'. It opposes the paradigm of war" (Maldonado-Torres 2007, p. 262).

Mignolo (2007) recovers the concept of "de-linking", or "desprendimento" (Quijano 2000), and refers to a shift in thinking that moves away from colonial influences and towards a more inclusive and diverse understanding of the world, known as other-universality or puri-versatility. According to this notion, this author opposes the post-colonial to the de-colonial, while "post-colonial criticism and theory is a project of scholarly transformation within the academy", the "de-colonial shift, in other words, is a project of de-linking" (Mignolo 2007, p. 452).

But what strategies use "de-linking"? "One strategy of de-linking is to de-naturalize concepts and conceptual fields that totalize A [sic] reality" (Mignolo 2007, p. 459). In this sense, "De-linking goes together with the de-colonial shift and the geo- and body-politics

of knowledge provide both the analytics for a critique and the vision toward a world in which many worlds can co-exist” (Mignolo 2007, p. 463). These words can also co-exist through art.

Comparing an original book to its film adaptation is challenging, as different works were invented at other times in human history. Thus, films, “when they become vehicles of chronicling and memorializing culture, are susceptible to literary analysis and share with literature certain generic affinities and particular concerns” (Nanda 2015, p. 1). We speak of the “invention” of writing but of the discovery of cinema. Cinema is a mechanic, not a dynamic. The “technique” of the cinematograph was invented and allowed the first public screening of *L’arrivé du train à la Cité* to have a birthplace, the Salon Grand Café in Paris on 28 December 1895.

In their future orientations, literature and cinema allow us to think of “a changeable word” (Ashcroft 2015, p. 174) that can be reconstructed. This dimension is often utopian, especially if we think of African literature in Portuguese. Two Mozambican cultural creators, a writer and a filmmaker, played a significant role in building their nation’s identity and culture in the decolonial context of the late 20th century. Director João Luís Sol de Carvalho (born 1953) and writer Mia Couto, who was born as António Emílio Leite Couto (born 1955), both hail from families of Portuguese immigrants in the same city, Beira, Sofala province, Mozambique. Mia Couto moved to present-day Maputo at a young age, and Sol de Carvalho grew up in Inhambane. While the writer began studying medicine in Maputo, Sol enrolled at the Film Conservatory in Lisbon. Neither of them finished their degree. With the independence of Mozambique, the writer and the filmmaker embarked on journalism. Between 1979 and 1981, Mia Couto worked for *Tempo* magazine, then *Tribuna*, the Mozambican Information Agency (AIM), of which he was also director, and *Notícias*. Sol de Carvalho also worked for *Tempo* at the same time. As a journalist, he interviewed Jean-Luc Godard, who was in Mozambique, invited by the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO) and worked as a director on 52 of the many television reports by Kuxa Kanema (“the birth of cinema” in the local language)—see interview conducted by (Miranda 2015; Pereira 2022).

The writer and director share another passion—their love of animals. Mia graduated in biology and adopted a word associated with the voice of a cat as his first name for his literary pseudonym. Sol de Carvalho, on the other hand, is a wildlife photographer in his spare time (Miranda 2015). They also both have an entrepreneurial side.

With an oeuvre of more than 20 films of a social and educational nature, Sol de Carvalho founded his own production company, “Ébano” together with Pedro Pimenta¹ and Licínio de Azevedo², followed by “Promarte”, which is still active and has produced dozens of works, both fiction and documentaries, as well as dozens of institutional productions. It is based at the top of the Scala Theater, in the center of Maputo, an art deco colonial icon with a capacity for a thousand people that Sol de Carvalho manages, having kept the original layout of the building. In addition to the Scala, Sol de Carvalho also manages a second large concert hall in Inhambane, the historic Tofo Cinema, linked to the first meetings of FRELIMO and the meeting from which was drafted the country’s first constitution.

In addition to teaching at Eduardo Mondlane University, Mia Couto runs Impacto Lda, an environmental impact assessment company he founded, where he works as a biologist. A polyphonic writer with over thirty published works in various literary genres, he debuted in 1983 with a book of poetry, *Raiz de Orvalho* [*Dew Root*]³. Then, in 1986 (in Maputo), Couto published his first book of short stories, *Vozes Anoitecidas* [*Nightfall Voices*]. He is one of the most widely read contemporary writers in Portuguese and the most translated and awarded African author in Portuguese. The author’s literary composition excels by incorporating thematic components that skillfully intertwine national and global concerns, alongside its language and aesthetic innovation.

One of the times they worked together was in 1993, after the civil war, which began in 1977 and lasted 15 years. Mia Couto, as a screenwriter, and Sol de Carvalho, as director, collaborated on the first series on Mozambican television, entitled “Não é preciso empurrar”

[“No need to push”], with seven episodes of 52 min each, about the understanding of the concept of democracy and an urban Mozambican family voting for the first time.

With this context in mind, our analysis and interpretation focus on the adaptation of Mia Couto’s short story “O dia em que explodiu Mabata-bata” (“The day Mabata-bata exploded”) into the film *Mabata Bata* by Sol de Carvalho. The movie is a free adaptation of Mia Couto’s short story, which develops the family and social problems in rural Mozambique, ravaged by civil war. It promotes a message about the urgency of a ceasefire, the only way to consolidate society and guarantee the fundamental rights of everyone, especially children. It is no accident that the main character is a child, which adds to the story’s drama. The analysis focuses on the dialog between literature and cinema and the modulations the two arts provide in treating the same topic. The film, as an adaptation of the original text, appropriates the theme, the characters, the setting, and the axiological values of Mia Couto’s short story but demonstrates its original imprint in specific strategies for expanding the fictional world that aims to deepen the fundamental problematic, as well as aesthetic re-signification and, in terms of interpretative pragmatics, greater emotional intensity.

The decolonial focus of these works lies not only in the fact that the authors are of Portuguese descent but also Mozambicans by nationality and conviction, facing the mission of writing aesthetically and historically about their nation, as the works present the iteration of Southern epistemology and identities that are “de-linking” from the colonial past. In this case, subalternity occurs between borders and between fellow compatriots, with humanitarian implications due to the war. [Silva \(2018, p. 4\)](#) observes: “The social realities and hierarchies constructed through the ideology of Empire made it so that taxonomies of human life translated across imperial/national boundaries”.

Our perspective here is that this de-linking, as a project, requires creating and disseminating knowledge from the South, in this case, from Mozambique. Thus, it contributes to creating epistemologies in and from the South. [Santos \(2022, p. 21\)](#) states, “Southern epistemologies refer to the production and validation of knowledge anchored in the resistance experiences of all social groups who have been systematically victims of injustice, oppression, and destruction caused by capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy”. As [Saúte \(2020, p. 237\)](#) explains, not all problems in the South are inherited from colonialism: “I grew up hearing that the blame for our delay, the blame for our inertia, the blame for our underdevelopment, the blame for our poverty, the blame for the lack of a future, or the blame for the disillusionment we felt in Africa came from colonialism. More than five decades have passed, and we are incapable of giving, in general, a meaning other than the anathema of misfortune”. This perspective, shared by many, suggests that African leadership also bears responsibility for the continent’s current state. This sentiment is echoed by director Sol de Carvalho in his response to [Zanete et al. \(2023, p. 250\)](#) regarding the political evolution of his country: “From a fascist colonial regime, to then a socialist regime, and then a savage capitalist regime”.

In the short story and film under analysis, in addition to representing two works from the South, the themes they address are associated with the consequences of capitalism and colonialism, the civil war in Mozambique and patriarchy. Azarias’s uncle represents this last one.

2. Brief Reflections on the Problem of Adaptation

Studies of the cinematographic adaptation of a literary work have been a constant debate on theories and methodologies since the beginning of the 20th century. In one of the best summaries of the theoretical situation in this area, Kamilla [Elliott \(2013\)](#) points to the repetitive appeals that have dominated theories since the beginning of the 20th century and which are mainly related to the fact that a film adaptation cannot be utterly faithful to the literary work that inspired it. Among the repeated appeals are, according to the same scholar, the opinions that (i) an emphasis on fidelity produces bad adaptations since they are different forms; that (ii) it is dubious to consider a literary work as the norm and a film as a danger to it, that (iii) an adaptation functions as an interpretation or a critical

commentary of what is adapted; that (iv) it is necessary to consider adaptation in the context of intertextuality and not as a direct translation; that (v) it is necessary to promote a sociological approach to adaptation studies; that (vi) it is necessary to study adaptation in a sociological context; that (vii) we need to study the audience's reception of the adaptation; that (viii) we need to consider adaptation as a process rather than a product (see Elliott 2013, pp. 26–28).

Considering an extensive volume of adaptation theories is unproductive when focusing on the dialog between a specific literary work and a specific film in the form of a case study. With this in mind, it is essential to establish the context in which the analysis in this text takes place, which corresponds to the comparative method. From this perspective, it should be emphasized, according to Jorge (2011), that the intention is only to address some modulations by “comparatively delineating texts/messages that say ‘practically’ the same thing or produce the same ‘textual effects’ without using strictly equivalent signifiers” (Jorge 2011, p. 69). In his theoretical considerations on film adaptation, Jorge (2011) draws on various previous studies, including Sergio Wolf's typology, which delineates the following categories: 1. An adequate reading (corresponding to possible fidelity); 2. The applied reading or insignificant fidelity; 3. The inadequate reading (or a “possible adultery” resulting from various updates); 4. The intersection of universes; 5. The re-reading or reinvention of the text; 6. The covert transposition, constructing undeclared versions (Wolf 2001, pp. 73–74).

Lubomír Doležel's theory of fictional worlds seems to be very close to this typology. He proposes a practical analytical tool based on a post-modern dialog and “rewriting” of fictional universes. Although Doležel restricts himself to the dialog between the fictional worlds of literary texts, it seems possible to draw inspiration from this idea about the intersemiotic dialog that is our case of literature and film. Doležel presents three types of dialog: 1. Transposition (maintains the same fictional world, changing the spatial and/or temporal coordinates), 2. Expansion (adds a new extension to the original fictional world, filling in the gaps and recreating prehistory or post-history), 3. Mutation (refers to an entirely different version that alters the story being told, creating worlds that problematize or challenge the legitimacy of the original fictional world) (Doležel [1998] 2003). The following analysis of the dialog between Mia Couto's short story and Sol de Carvalho's film considers this theoretical-methodological context. This adaptation process is based on intertextuality but does not use fidelity.

3. In the Beginning Was the Verb: “The Day Mabata-Bata Exploded” by Mia Couto

The book of short stories, *Vozes Anoitecidas*, was published in 1986 in Mozambique during the civil war. The short story “O dia em que explodiu Mabata-bata” [“The day Mabata-bata exploded”] comes third in the collection. The number three is also present several times throughout the narrative. After hearing about a mine explosion, three soldiers are looking for Azarias, the little shepherd. The total number of belongings in the little shepherd's bag is also three, as is the triangle of characters in the story: the child, the uncle, and the grandmother. The number “expresses an intellectual and spiritual order, in God, in the cosmos, and man. It synthesizes the trinity of the living being” (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1994, p. 654). In this short story, this is the order missed but needed for the well-being of people and the nation's construction in a period when the civil war threatened the utopian ideas of independence.

Just as the film begins in the background, the short story starts blazingly, with short sentences and appealing to the power of visualization, only to introduce an onomatopoeia in the following sentence: “Suddenly, the ox exploded. It exploded without a múúú” (Couto 2002, p. 47). This opening is both horrifying and tender. The ox explodes without mooing and gradually dematerializes. From the violence of the opening, we move on to the main character's reaction, a witness to what happened: the little orphan shepherd, Azarias. The pace stretches elastically, gradually bringing the reader closer to the slow-motion movement found in some of Homer's best descriptions of war. Everything hovers

in a vertical downward movement as if, after the explosive ascent of the animal, the slowest descent is still reflected, not in a mirror, but dialectically, inside the child's chest. Azarias feels fear, turning the surrounding landscape into a list of misfortunes which, when understood, become ontological. The greatest fear is of the adult, of the uncle, Raul, on whom Azarias has depended since he was orphaned, to whom the ox belonged, and who should be the one to protect the child, just as the homeland has a duty to protect Mozambicans. Thus, *ab initio*, there is a first death, not of the ox, but the metaphorical death of Azarias, because "anguish ate up all his air" (Couto 2002, p. 49). This paralysis was the fear of his uncle's mistreatment, to which he added "mistreated dreams" (Couto 2002, p. 49), such as the right to education: "Other people's children had the right to school. Not him, he wasn't a child. The service pulled him out of bed early and put him back to sleep when there was no more childhood left inside him" (Couto 2002, p. 49).

The landscape description, emphasizing the river and the water, refers to central elements in some of Mia Couto's short stories, as Rothwell (2004) has already pointed out. The "ndlati" (from the Xi-Ronga language) appears to Azarias to explain the sound he hears with the explosion of the ox. The "ndlati" is the hen or rooster of the sky, it also plays a metaphorical role here, as an African mythological bird associated with the production of lightning, in the antithetical construction between its smallness and the greatness of the misfortune it can cause. His home is the mountain "where all the rivers come together to be born of the same will of water" (Couto 2002, p. 48), but the light of the lightning makes four new colors appear in him and, perhaps frightened by the new fuzz, he flies towards the lightning, risking being struck down. In flames, he throws himself to the ground, "hollowing it out" (Couto 2002, p. 48) and pouring his urine into it. "Ndlati" thus becomes a new phoenix of hope, explaining the inexplicable: the mines planted by Mozambicans who annihilate their compatriots and their property during the civil war (1977–1992).

By the hand of a heterodiegetic and omniscient narrator, the story progresses in suspended waves through the thoughts and hesitations of the little shepherd, who is frightened more by his uncle's predictable reaction than by the phenomenon he has just witnessed. When the main character's thoughts become more abstract, reality strikes, like a film in the making, and, lost in his thoughts, he does not even realize that all the oxen have escaped. But the story's mortar is made of counterpoint thoughts, and his uncle's voice appears in the orphan's head: "–Don't show up without an ox, Azarias. I'm just saying: it's better if you don't show up at all" (Couto 2002, p. 49). Azarias crosses the river, like a border to the unknown, to nowhere: "–I have nowhere [to run] to, grandmother" (Couto 2002, p. 52). In Rothwell's interpretation, the river has an ambivalent function: "The river serves both grammatically to restore to Azarias a partial degree of agency and to furnish him with a source of maternal comfort. The waters act as an amniotic protection for the orphan" (Rothwell 2004, p. 111). The light of the story itself, from a formal point of view, seems to fade. The keywords become "dying"; "anguish"; "fleeing"; "shadows"; "old"; and "rusty", to end up in the final drama, Azarias's death caused by stepping on a mine, but poetically metamorphosed into liberation: "The little shepherd swallowed that red whole, it was the cry of the fire burst. In the crumbs of the night, he saw the "ndlati", the bird of lightning, descending (...) And before the bird of fire made up its mind, Azarias ran and embraced it on the journey of its flame" (Couto 2002, pp. 53–54). A metaphor of the violence and war confronts the knowledge of Western logic culture in a short story about the consequences of the civil war, the social and economic situation of the people of Mozambique, their relationship with nature and the environment, and the attack on people's livelihoods and children's rights, such as compulsory schooling. Harari (2022) refers to the cause of wars as "human stupidity", and one of the cures is "humility". The question is, as he puts it: "How can we make countries, religions, and cultures more realistic and modest about their true place in the world?" (Harari 2022, p. 211).

If on the one hand, we have Azarias, who is triply unprotected and underprivileged (a child, an orphan, and poor in a country deconstructed by war); on the other hand, Raul is the creator of the situation, the hallmark of the powerful, the representation of

the patriarchy. He is only concerned with safeguarding his interests. His construction as a villainous character, however, makes him an anti-hero. In contrast, grandmother Carolina, with her *bonhomie*, is Azarias' only source of affection, along with the animals. This relationship between power and subalternity metaphorically extends Azarias's family nucleus to Mozambique's national and international nucleus in a deeply colonial world, in the words of Chatterjee (2010).

After the news brought by the soldiers, who function like the brass section in a symphony, introducing the crescendo of death in suspense, the uncle and grandmother go to look for Azarias. Unlike the movie preceding it, the family reunion takes place in complete darkness, with only voices audible. The valley's topography, with the river as a witness, divides the conciliatory grandmother from the predatory uncle. Negotiation is complex because the uncle will not stop lying, like in children's tales or fables about malicious animals. Grandma Carolina, a guardian figure, proposes a solution to no avail: "–Your uncle is pleased. Choose [a request]. He must respect your request" (Couto 2002, p. 53). The request in the form of a question is simple: "– Uncle: next year, can I go to school?" (Couto 2002, p. 53).

The permanent symbolism of the explosion and dismemberment of bodies like a great open-air butcher's shop echoes deep in the identity ears of Mozambican readers coming from the various divisions of the great bird-country, which seen from the sky or the map is just what it resembles, a bird with open wings (a "ndlati"?), but which, up close, is an endless sum of administrative, ethnic, social, cultural, natural, economic and linguistic divisions. The division thus makes one think of a dismembered country whose natural borders do not correspond to those imagined. As Perez-Torres reminds us in the Preface to *Ethnic literatures and transnationalism*, "to push for a decolonizing consciousness is premised upon the need to understand not just how nations are formed, but how national identity is made up undone through the continued movement of people, cultures, objects, goods, and thoughts across national borders in complex and generative exchanges" (Nanda 2015, pp. xiii–xiv). In the case of Mozambique, we would have to go back into history and how the current borders were created, without respect for ethnicities and the space they occupied in that area of the globe, to understand some of the social and cultural problems that have continued to this day. On this subject, refer, for example, to Newitt (2022, p. 11): "Modern Mozambique owes its existence to the Luso-British Treaty of 1891 (...) Before the partition of 1891, Southeast Africa constituted a geographic unit. It shared history, but various treaties roughly subdivided it into six states". Cabaço (2007, p. 397) indirectly takes up this idea by noting that Mozambique is formed by a "mosaic of different experiences" that "interacted in and with the liberation movement", being "an element of not a few frictions and internal conflicts" within FRELIMO (Liberation Front of Mozambique).

It is interesting to note that the symbolism linked to the figure of the child accentuates the same axiological values proposed by some works by African authors such as Angolans (for example, Luandino Vieira, Pepetela, Manuel Rui, and Ondjaki) and Mozambicans (Luís Bernardo Honwana, Mia Couto, for instance), in which the figure of the child corresponds to the future of the country. Mia Couto's short story highlights the conflicts within a young nation, as even families experience internal confrontations. With consensus between the various family members (and of a nation), building something new and lasting would be easier. The final tragedy, therefore, can catalyze the emotions and forces necessary for a possible reconstruction, a phoenix reborn. As Rothwell (2004, p. 112) summarizes, "Couto draws on a variety of cultural sources in this particularly poignant tale that, in essence, seeks to restore Azarias's right to dream in the midst of the horrific civil war that victimized children and peasants long after the cessation of hostilities through a proliferation of landmines".

4. Then Came the Camera: *Mabata Bata* by Sol de Carvalho

Thirty years after the story was published, director Sol de Carvalho is entering a CPLP film competition, representing Mozambique, with a first draft of a screenplay based on Mia

Couto's narrative. The funding is small, but it is exciting to co-produce with Portugal and Rodrigo Areias' production company (Associate Producer), "Bando à Parte", based in the north of Portugal. Sol de Carvalho is a perfectionist, extremely attached to highly disciplined and hierarchical film crews. Ambitions increase, and the script becomes a feature film of one hour, thirteen minutes, and fifteen seconds, a long way from the initial pages of the short story. The new script was written by José Mário, and Ricardo Freitas handled the production. The support that completes the small budget comes from the Mozambican National Institute of Audiovisual and Cinema, the Portuguese Institute of Cinema and Audiovisual (ICA), Televisão de Moçambique, Associação Cinematográfica Olho de Vidro, the Swiss Confederation, and the Camões Institute. The music was composed by Pierre Dufloo, a Frenchman who currently resides in Inhambane. Chibuto, in Gaza province, north of Maputo, is the location chosen for the shoot.

Until now, Sol de Carvalho, with dozens of films to his credit, including his first feature, *O jardim do outro homem* [The other man's garden], was a militant, socially committed filmmaker who invariably worked in Portuguese on themes such as domestic violence, gender issues, AIDS, life on the outskirts of the cities, which are dear to Mozambique in terms of state funding and public taste, always with his distribution, not only in his theaters but also among rural populations. In addition to these themes related to nation-building, his attention is also drawn to universal themes such as human relationships, the status of women (in Mozambique), and love, as the director recalls: "The first love film in post-independence Mozambican cinema is also mine. It was shot on film and is called *The Window*" (Miranda 2015, p. 23).

The approach he and screenwriter José Mário took to Mia Couto's short story at a time when his career needed a new lease of life is fascinating. Carvalho was sure that Couto's short story responded well to his dramaturgical concerns learned at the conservatory: "Star strong".

In the story, an ox exploded. From then on, literature and cinema only had to continue together in a Kafkaesque horror. Above all, it was necessary to adapt the few pages of the short story into more than an hour-long movie⁴. While Couto's short story ends with Azarias' death, Carvalho's film begins with that ending. At precisely one minute and zero seconds, the movie presents the explosion. A movie is a story turned inside out; why? It is because what is explicit in the story has to be implicit in the film. In the same way, what was invisible in the story must be visible in the movie. Sol de Carvalho was sure of his rules and his cinematic will because his actors overlap with the characters in the story in the memory of the readers and viewers, or, as a rule of filmmaking goes, acting speaks louder than words.

Following the rules, after the silent generic, which has an aesthetic effect and brings you into the movie, José Magro and Sol de Carvalho present the second novelty of the adaptation. The first was reducing the title to simply "Mabata Bata". Then, a short classical subtitle in Portuguese, while the rest of the film is spoken in Changana, creates realism and decolonizes the language by valuing the local one. The subtitles are a whole program that, together with the story, will be explosive in terms of invention. As the movie says, "When a violent death occurs, the victim's spirit is left without a home", creating family misfortune, "a ceremony must then be held to appease it and give it a new home". Following the strangeness that is in no way reminiscent of Mia Couto's short story, we hear the sound of footsteps in slow motion like a pulse. We then recognize the river and its banks and hear a voiceover that is always charming and classic when following it ab initio: "My feet flew with the wind . . ." It's the shepherd who narrates and steps on the mine, exploding. Returning to classic cinema, we see the landscape of the beginning with a setting sun. Finally, the ox, intact and alive, contemplates the surrounding landscape from the top of a cliff with ruminant satisfaction.

In the same shot, a fourteen-year-old teenager, Lúcia (Medianeira Massingue), crosses the bucolic landscape, and as she leaves, four soldiers run past. The movie's spatial situation is elegantly and economically set, and this same style is repeated at the end to

create a perfect circle. The mother (Ilda Gonzalez) tells Lucia that Irondina, the sorceress, has announced a disaster and that Lucia must bathe in that boiling water. The child refuses but ends up taking a bath, the first of two, and changing her dress (the costumes are by Louggi Junior), following her mother to the ceremony. Close to the ceremony, we finally recognize grandmother Carolina (Filomena Remígio) cooking and an urbane, somewhat clumsy Raul (Horácio Guiamba). He asks: "What if the ceremony goes wrong?" The grandmother replies: "The spirit can bring misfortune. It has no home".

The movie is somewhat forward; it follows a standard chronological order. Raul remains uncompromising in this post-mortem life: "–Am I to blame for his death?", "–Am I to blame for the war?", "–Azarias had to graze the oxen according to tradition so that I could get married. You taught me that". Raul is speaking about "lobolo". According to this tradition, the bride's family receives money or valuable possessions for losing her marriage and going to another home. After that, the woman becomes a member of the family of the man she marries. Doing this, focusing on religion and local traditions, Carvalho contributes to the decolonization of Mozambican cinema. As he states in an interview: "Traditional culture is essential in my films. (...) Being sensitive does not mean supporting. Traditional Mozambican culture is very sexist. I am against the current (...). There is only one film I have in which the protagonist is a man, which is this one [Mabata Bata]; a man or a young man, but all the others are always women. (...) And this African society is spiritualized; it has a powerful magical world that supports this sexist power relationship. And the magical world is not just a consequence of our material world." (Pereira 2022, pp. 171–72).

The family is dressed up; Raul is wearing a coat and tie, and the village chief (Manuel Matchai) is wearing a red sash of high military rank, coming with his daughter, Raul's fiancée. They sit around waiting for the sorceress Irondina (Esperança Naiene) while the bride and groom look at each other. Slowly, with ritual calm, the sorceress comes surrounded by her entourage, dressed in red, sits down, covers herself with a cloth, receives the sheepskin, the set of cowries, and, shaking it, calls the spirits of that family. "We want to know if the spirits are blessing the dowry" and, looking at the conch shells: "These are the spirits of Azarias's parents who have died and returned home". And, for a more crude stick: "This is Azarias who is alone". Then we see the dead man, now an adult, wearing the same blue shirt but years older, with a walking stick, coming out of a hollow tree: "I've just died, and they're already calling me!" The entire sequence of the dead man is astonishing, and it is here, ten minutes into the film, that the virtuosity of the direction shines through, considerably extending the fictional world of origin. A device moves out of the tree with the dead man and accompanies him as he leaves, mumbling, to follow him down a slope where the tree buries itself and, climbing back up, the viewer sees what the character sees: a plateau of African trees where Azarias's is in the center. All the monologues of the spirit (Mário Mabjaia), always in the same magical place, somewhere near the village of Chibuto, elevate Sol de Carvalho's film to heights. The dead man hears the sound, distorted and effective (sound by Dinis Henriques), of Irondina's prayer. He refuses to go home, continuing in the behavioral posture of Mia Couto's short story. The presence of the spirit, indeed the best performance of all the actors in the film, is as solid in body and voice as the trunks surrounding him.

Once again, following classical grammar, the wind instrument (Art Director: Vicente Muchongo) reappears in the hands of the boy Azarias, the first analepsis in the narrative's time. The film imitates thought. Not only is the bright spot on the screen of consciousness shrouded in an irrational black, and the viewer's continuous identification with the hero, but also in the leaps that thought makes back and forth like the movie. In this sense, flashbacks are natural because what the viewer sees on screen corresponds to their intuition. In other words, the viewer recognizes as their own this recursive capacity that cinema also possesses, which has been "adapted" from linguistics and narrative grammar. The novelty of Carvalho's mise-en-scène, about the short story, is also the introduction of an audiovisual motif that imposes a greater symbolic and emotional intensity on the story: a whip used to beat the ground to guide the oxen, which cracks with every call from the uncle at the

end of the sentence. It is quite a complex motif because it conveys the notion of aggression and violence. The blows resound as if Azarias were whipping his admonitions, and, at the same time, the land itself is fratricidally dismembered and subjected to scourging. From a psychoanalytic point of view, a sexual problem is introduced, as Azarias has to shepherd so that Raul can get married, thus revealing his uncle's macho power and subduing his desires incited by Lucia's presence.

Lucia carries water from the well. The two young people cross paths; she, with a bucket on her head, Azarias, suddenly energetic, whipping the ground of the oxen as they pass. They exchange a gentle smile, and the girl stares back. Azarias leans against an old anthill in thought. His friends arrive and promise to teach him to write. Just then, another bunch of older shepherds sit defiantly on the hill opposite. As in a John Ford movie (like him, Sol de Carvalho is a "fast contemplative"), the groups measure up. The hero is visibly younger and weaker. A musical duel with the wind instruments follows this. Sonically, they differ from each other. The verdict comes from the lips of the older gang leader: "–You're not from here. This is our pasture". Although the setting seems harmonious (the shots that follow with the retreating shepherds, the anthill, the herds in the background, and the surrounding vegetation), the confrontation between the groups of boys, although natural at that age, can once again convey the symbolism of the split, as well as the defiance of orders. With Carvalho, the situations have a beginning, a middle, and an end, all correctly defined. There is a tense scene in which Azarias' friend (Milton Samuel) goes to school, leaving behind a good conversation between the two. They promise to see each other in the evening and when they leave school.

Azarias, with nothing to do but graze the oxen, takes a shot at a bird that has just landed but misses. Out of frustration comes the impulse to throw another slingshot, this time at the ox. He throws it, and it bites. An ox and a tale bind Azarias and Carvalho. On the dead man's side, always in solid scenes, with a staged light (Director of Photography: Jorge Quintela) on the great actor in a dazzling décor (Location scouting: André Guimar and Marieta Manjate), the impasse persists: "–How do you want me to decide about my own family? It's like being a victim and a judge simultaneously".

Another noteworthy scene is in the village where Helena, Raul's fiancée, is talking to her father, now dressed in plain clothes. And she hears him say, "–The neighbors are complaining that the soldiers are demanding food!" The truth is that, according to the bride's father and the village chief, "–We have a lot of new refugees!" Fleeing the war and the new tormentors, "insiders" replace colonial power and threats are the hallmarks of a post-independence Mozambique. Raul's fiancée, to whom her father reminds her of the promise and the wolfing down of the oxen, hesitates: "What's the point of getting married? To stay here for the rest of your life?" To which her father replies: "In the city, you'll be just another girl. Here, you're the chief's daughter", "–You just have to wait for the oxen to get fatter". The walled-in bride countered: "I'd better get married soon because I don't want to stay here any longer". And the father's reaction, with his eyes glazed over, his posture tired, and his mouth turned sideways like he's biting his lips, is that of a father hurt by his daughter's ingratitude. The scene deepens the social and family problems and the power of patriarchy, demonstrating the power of tradition in which women must adjust to the order in force. The father does not care about his daughter's feelings, believing that her position in the local community alone gives her a certain happiness and great prestige. The daughter, who does not seem to have any genuine interest in marriage or her fiancé, also takes advantage of the situation, seeing in her father's desire to marry her at least the opportunity to leave the house where, as she does not have the freedom she craves.

The anthological scene in which the friend hands Azarias his notebook, saying: "Repeat these words", "B...A...T...A", "Now read!" While the student is studying, the "teacher" is having fun playing spinning tops. Looking at a military boot print, he calls out to Azarias: "–Do you think it's dangerous?" Azarias examines it and, not recognizing any animal origin, says no. They continue to whip the ground, making the top spin around, and, just like in the classic movies, the ox advances dangerously across the pasture, thinking

that the lashes are for him. Then, an explosion is heard. And the wooden pawn points in a direction. In the movie's present action, the sorceress is the only one who can listen to the sound of the flashback explosion and raises her head. Mabata Bata has exploded. There is no more rain of "pieces and slices, grain and leaves of ox". The meat is no longer "red butterflies", nor are the bones "scattered coins" (Couto 2002, p. 47). In Carvalho's cinema, an ox is an ox, using the image to show the imposing nature of the animal, which, even dead, commands respect.

In the art of illusion, only the truth counts. In Carvalho's film, the dead ox, with its eye open, the look of an ox, tied up and made up with blood, is presented to us alive and whole. Until the end, the oxen will move from place to place, sometimes in the hands of the soldiers and sometimes back to Raul, and an hour into the movie, as the rules of the second plot dictate, Azarias explodes again. Once again, the entire sequence of the spirit and a prodigious change of focus when the spirit, through the sorceress Irondina, sends a message to the girlfriend he left behind will remain in the memory. In the end, the soul returns home, and everything would be fine if it were not for the soldiers setting fire to the village, putting its inhabitants on the run, and all because of the oxen. The dead man comes back out of the destroyed house and leaves it in the shadow, while Lucia, as at the beginning of the movie, walks by herself. The film director's intention was: "I tried to make a nautilus, which is a Mozambican shell that turns 360 degrees on itself. I tried to make a plan like this. I couldn't do the whole plan, but I tried to do half of it at least. But why? If nature can produce those forms, then the use of frames and camera movements based on those forms could become the identity element of our films. Why not try, in cinema, to make a curve like that that could give meaning to a shot of a Mozambican film?" (Pereira 2022, p. 176).

The film won two technical awards for Jorge Quintela (Best Cinematography) and André Guiomar (Best Editing) at FESPACO, Africa's largest film festival, on 23 February 2019, in Quagadougou, and from then on, was immediately requested for festivals around the world.

5. Conclusions

As Osterhammel (2010, p. 119) defends, "The post-colonial world has retained forms of manipulation, exploitation, and cultural expropriation, even if colonialism itself belongs to the past". It is why it is essential to hear the voices of the South, such as Mia Couto and Sol de Carvalho. Mia Couto's "The day Mabata-bata exploded" affirms a reality that distances itself from the Western world, presenting a reality through local themes and instruments: the language, Portuguese but Africanized, transformed, and transformative; the symbolism of elements of local nature (the river, the bird, the ox); the relationship with orality and the History of Mozambique; the rebuke of the perpetuation of asymmetries and the subalternation of subjects. Like Sol de Carvalho's camera, Mia Couto's writing in this short story is therefore engaged in a utopian vision of the "subversive political function of literature" (Ashcroft 2015, p. 173) and of changing the world, zooming in on characters who represent an entire group, and on the African space. It is a space that seems to communicate with the past, which is also violent, as if "the boundary of the post-independence state remains an arbitrary but inescapable trace of colonial past, a structural effect embedded by neocolonial discourse" (Ashcroft 2015, p. 169). The violence of colonialism and the colonial war persisted in Mozambique after independence, through civil war, hindering the nation's progress.

For its part, the film adaptation of *Mabata Bata* by José Magro and Sol de Carvalho is a classic with all the rules of the majors and so-called commercial cinema. Still, at its heart, it is original, topographical, and, dare we say it, African, in two senses: on the one hand, it works in its own mined terrain, almost ignoring and despising its origin, but never, at any time, losing sight of it, like someone observing from afar; on the other hand, it adapts freely grafted characters, situations, extensions, and anticipations of different colors, and shapes, that come to life from the autochthonous world of Mozambique. There

is an arrogant, confident side to the second construction, based on and about the virtues of Couto's short story.

In this sense, recalling Doležel's ([1998] 2003) typology on the "rewriting" of fictional worlds, the film is not a transposition, as it maintains the primary coordinates of Couto's story, albeit with a considerable expansion in time. It would also be difficult to speak of a mutation because there is no change to the primary lines of the adapted narrative. The film extends the original story, including several additional scenes. It primarily addresses the issue of ancestry, with the witchcraft scene and the introduction of the dead man being noteworthy examples. The manifestations of traditions emphasize the supernatural aspect (which maintains indiscernible contours of "reality" perhaps to signal the existence of another conception of reality, much broader and more plastic than the European/Western one). Another type of expansion consists of the elaboration of the feminine. In the original short story, only one female character, the grandmother Carolina, is mentioned. However, the film adaptation introduces several new female characters, including Irondina, a sorceress; Helena, Raul's fiancée; and Lucia, a young girl who shares a tender and subtle seduction with Azarias through gestures, glances, closeness, and distance. This expansion highlights the feminine universe and its emotional and empathetic qualities when contrasted with the masculine world. The film thus deepens a reflection not only on the place of the child/adolescent in a traditionally male universe subjugated to the violence of war but also on the place and power of African women, as the film director states in an interview with Pereira (2022).

Writer and filmmaker, professionals working in their field, who have known each other for a long time and respect each other's work, allow us to rewrite the post-colonial nation, questioning its decolonial history.

Taking advantage of the story's plots and what happened in the narrative, the film takes place at another time, which is no longer that of the story but much later than the death of the child and much earlier than the death of the ox. However, the dialogues and situations in the film always maintain sight of this, and everything that begins in the short story is followed in the smallest detail, in another dimension.

Both discourses refer to the African experience, especially the film (language, religion, traditions, history). As Carvalho says, "I can hardly see an African cinema and an African aesthetic without being inhabited by these signs and the logics that the spiritual world exerts on people" (Miranda 2015, p. 28).

Our analysis has shown, above all, how art, in this case, literature and cinema, is important in the dialogue between observation and criticism in constructing a history of a nation. De-colonization uses Mozambique's history and traditions as locus of enunciation and action (cf. Mignolo 2007, p. 492) to think about nation-building, in this case, through the years of civil war.

Civil war was one of the elements inherited from colonialism, in the sense that during that period, colonial policy was not one of unity between ethnic groups but of division. The victims of civil war were the subalterns, the most disadvantaged, and, in particular, children. Both authors, Mia Couto and Sol de Carvalho, give voice to these underprivileged people through Azarias, whose name refers, *ab initio*, to misfortune: living in a country at war, perhaps orphaned because of it, and therefore doubly unprotected. Through their art, both authors allow us access to the non-Western Other, watching modes of subalternization beyond colonial experiences. They decolonize by re-signifying the nation, rewriting African traditions, religions, and mythology in "epistemologies of the South" (Santos 2014), presenting ways of understanding the world beyond the West. They create new ways of understanding power relations and war. Both authors present "new modes of meaning-production (...) proposing decolonial modes of knowledge and signification of time, space, bodies, and objects" (Silva 2018, p. 16). The short story by Mia Couto shows how decolonization is reflected in the language used, which is influenced by local languages and includes colloquialisms that are reminiscent of the oral tradition in African culture. Meanwhile, Sol de Carvalho's project on decolonization is more precise, as the

film is spoken in Changana, a local language. Both artists deconstruct hierarchies by their works. Azarias breaks free from the oppressive forces through his death. In the same way, art liberates itself by “de-linking” from European Portuguese, using other local languages or their influence to affirm linguistic decolonization and convey the reality of Mozambique more accurately. The relationship between the arts and the idea of a nation is complex; as Ashcroft (2015, p. 173) reminds us, “writers [and other artists, we could add] do not set out to ‘write the nation,’ but are invariably held to do so within critical discourse”. A critical discourse that art can settle, as Carvalho states: “I really want to explain many things that people cannot explain without knowing their dynamics, which even creates a reaction of contempt, “they are underdeveloped, poor people”, and feelings of superiority that are ridiculous, seen through “Southern eyes”. (Pereira 2022, p. 174).

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, L.G.X. and J.V.; methodology, S.Š., L.G.X.; investigation, L.G.X., J.V. and S.Š.; resources, L.G.X., J.V. and S.Š.; writing—original draft preparation, J.V., L.G.X., S.Š.; writing—review and editing, L.G.X., S.Š.; supervision, L.G.X.; project administration, L.G.X.; funding acquisition, L.G.X. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by Macao Polytechnic University, grant number RP/FLT-10/2022.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Former festival director, current member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences of the United States.
- ² Brazilian filmmaker based in Mozambique since 1975, with internationally awarded work.
- ³ All the translations are our responsibility.
- ⁴ An A4 page of text conventionally corresponds to 1 min of film.

References

- Ashcroft, Bill. 2015. A borderless world. Literature, nation, translation. In *Ethnic Literatures and Transnationalism. Critical Imaginaries for Global Age*. Edited by Aparajita Nanda. New York and London: Routledge, pp. 163–76.
- Cabaço, José Luís. 2007. Moçambique: Identidades, Colonialismo e Libertação. Ph.D. thesis, USP, São Paulo, Brazil.
- Chatterjee, Partha. 2010. *Empire and Nation*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Chevalier, Jean, and Alain Gheerbrant. 1994. *Dictionary of Symbols*. Lisbon: Editorial Teorema.
- Couto, Mia. 2002. O dia em que explodiu Mabata-bata. In *Vozes Anoitecidas*. Lisboa: Caminho, pp. 45–54.
- Doležel, Lubomír. 2003. *Heterocosmica: Fikce a Možné Světy (Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds)*. Prague: Karolinum. First published 1998.
- Elliott, Kamilla. 2013. Theorizing adaptations/Adapting theories. In *Adaptation Studies. New Challenges, New Directions*. Edited by Jorgen Bruhn, Anne Gjelsvik and Eirik Frisvold Hanssen. London: Bloomsbury, pp. 19–45.
- Harari, Yuval Noah. 2022. *21 Lições para o Século XXI*. Lisboa: Elsinore.
- Jorge, Carlos Jorge. 2011. *Stories, Images and Letters. Literature and Cinema in a Comparative Perspective*. Lisbon: Apenas.
- Maldonado-Torres, Nelson. 2007. On the coloniality of being: Contributions to the development of a concept. *Cultural Studies* 21: 240–70. Available online: <http://www.decolonialtranslation.com/english/maldonado-on-the-coloniality-of-being.pdf> (accessed on 1 September 2023). [CrossRef]
- Mignolo, Walter D. 2007. ‘DELINKING’. The rhetoric of modernity, the logic of coloniality and the grammar of de-coloniality. *Cultural Studies* 21: 449–514. [CrossRef]
- Miranda, Maria Geralda de. 2015. Cinema africano em foco: Entrevista com o Cineasta Sol de Carvalho (African cinema in focus: Interview with filmmaker Sol de Carvalho). *Mulemba* 7: 21–28. [CrossRef]
- Nanda, Aparajita, ed. 2015. *Ethnic Literatures and Transnationalism. Critical Imaginaries for Global Age*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Newitt, Malyn. 2022. *Breve História de Moçambique*. Lisboa: Texto & Grafia.
- Osterhammel, Jürgen. 2010. *Colonialism. A Theoretical Overview*. Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers.
- Pereira, Ana Cristina. 2022. O poder ao centro—Um modo de ver moçambicano: Conversa com Sol de Carvalho. In *Abrir os Gomos do Tempo. Conversas sobre Cinema em Moçambique*. Edited by Ana Cristina Pereira and Rosa Cabecinhas. Braga: UMinho Editora. Centro de Estudos de Comunicação e Sociedade, pp. 147–84. [CrossRef]
- Quijano, Anibal. 2000. Modernidad, colonialidad y América Latina. *Nepantla. Views from South* 1: 533–80.

- Rothwell, Phillip. 2004. *A Postmodern Nationalist. Truth, Orality, and Gender in the Work of Mia Couto*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press.
- Santos, Boaventura de Sousa. 2014. *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers.
- Santos, Boaventura de Sousa. 2022. *O Fim do Império Cognitivo: A Afirmação das Epistemologias do Sul*. Maputo: Ethale Publishing.
- Saute, Nelson. 2020. *Planisfério moçambicano—Atlas literário*. Maputo: Marimbe.
- Silva, Daniel. 2018. *Anti-Empire: Decolonial Interventions in Lusophone Literatures*. Cambridge: Liverpool University Press.
- Wolf, Sergio. 2001. *Cine/Literatura—Ritos de Pasaje*. Buenos Aires and Barcelona: Paidós.
- Zanete, Renata, Viviane Almeida, and Lurdes Macedo. 2023. “Nós matámos o cão Tinhoso” e *Monólogos com a história*: Entre a literatura e o cinema—Reescritas e memórias moçambicanas. *Revista de Estudos Literários* 13: 239–69. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]

Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.