

BERLIN 2016 Forum

***An Outpost of Progress*: the hallucinated past**

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17/02/2016 - BERLIN 2016: Portuguese director Hugo Vieira da Silva broaches the subject of colonialism with a free narrative, strong vision, references to silent film and elements of the absurd



Nuno Lopes and Ivo Alexandre in *An Outpost of Progress*

It seems fortune is smiling on new Portuguese arthouse film. After coming out on top at film festivals all over the world (thanks to directors like Miguel Gomes and João Pedro Rodrigues), the freer, more innovative and joyful side of Portuguese film, a sector as small as the films are pleasing, brings us another glimpse into Portugal's past. In a tone that differs radically from that of *Letters From War*, which is in the running for the Golden Bear, *An Outpost of Progress* broaches the subject of Portuguese colonialism in Africa. The playful and innovative spirit of the third feature film by filmmaker **Hugo Vieira da Silva**, produced by the great **Paulo Branco** (through Alfama Films and Leopardo Filmes, together with República Filmes), was the delight of the Forum section at this year's 66th Berlinale.

The film tells the story of two colonial officials, the serious and sophisticated João de Mattos (**Nuno Lopes**) and the happy-go-lucky Sant'Anna (**Ivo Alexandre**), and is based on the book of the same name by Joseph Conrad. The two officials are sent to an ivory trading post in the depths of the Congolian forests, the only means of access to which being steamboats that travel up and down the Congo River. They are sent there because the former commander of the post has died, and they must keep it up and running, even though the slaves (who João refuses to refer to as such), aren't much inclined towards work. With ivory in short supply along with a dwindling interest in getting hold of it, the servants turn on the Portuguese men with disdain and sarcasm ("call me Joanna of Austria") and are attacked by a group of local men.

In this situation, the frame of mind of the colonists (or *mundeles*, as they're called by the natives: white men, whose skin colour makes them look like they've returned from the land of the dead) changes with extreme consequences. Sant'Anna abandons himself to spirits and tries to connect with the local people, giving rise to some really lovely scenes; Mattos on the other hand soon succumbs to malaria, which causes real suffering on his part and a failed attempt to have sex with a native to help him regain his strength, along with other such delirious schemes.

Visions are one of the most flamboyant tools that Silva uses. Whether they're brought on by alcohol, illness or sheer madness triggered by the steamboat being late, it is through these that *An Outpost of Progress* gives free rein to imagination, crossing over into the realm of the absurd. There are encounters with personalities of the Portuguese colonial era (António Francisco da Silva Porto, for example), conversations held to the cries of monkeys that present the natives dressed as European nobles from times gone by, and a priceless interaction with "the leopard man". The film uses captions, subtitles and even drawings to convey all this, contrasting it with the wild exuberance of the images put together by the director of photography, **Fernando Lockett**. These images range from delicate close-ups of plants and the colonists bathing in the river, to the hazy and distorted shots of imaginary landscapes, and culminate in a magnificent tribute to silent film (music and all) in a comical chase scene between two of the characters.

Hugo Vieira da Silva brings us an evocative journey into a hallucinated forest with a film that's just as crazy and clearly demonstrates his undeniable creativeness.

(Translated from Spanish)