LETTERS FROM WAR

A FILM BY IVO M. FERREIRA

Based on the book António Lobo Antunes, D’Este Viver Aqui Neste Papel Descripto, Cartas da Guerra, edited by Maria José and Joana Lobo Antunes.
The letters in this book were written by a 28 year-old man in the privacy of his relationship to his wife, isolated from everything and everyone for two years during the colonial war in Angola, without ever thinking they would one day be read by anyone else. We shall not describe here what these letters are: each person will read them in a different manner, certainly distinct from our own. But whatever the approach may be, literary, biographical, a war document or a love story, we know it is extraordinary in all these regards.

The decision to publish them is not ours: it is the expressed will of our Mother, the recipient and keeper of this estate until recently. She always told us we could read them and publish them after her death, and that moment has now come.

Our parents met and started dating in the Summer of 1966 in Praia das Maçãs. In 1969 our father graduated in Medical Science and was drafted to the military where he would be sent to the Colonial War. They decided to marry on 8th August 1970, our Mother fell pregnant in the following month and our Father left for Angola on 6th January 1971.

The flow of almost daily letters is interrupted for three periods: during our Father’s leave in Lisbon (35 days in September 1971); between April and July 1972 from the family’s arrival to Marimba until the moment our Mother fell ill with hepatitis and was admitted to hospital in Luanda; and between August 1972 and January 1973 when the family returns to Marimba. The last letter dates from 30th January 1973, when wife and daughter return to Marimba where they stayed until the end of military duty in March 1973.

‘D’Este Viver Aqui Neste Papel Descripto’ was the title our Father had chosen for what became his first published novel. The publisher refused it at the time and it became known as ‘Elephant’s Memory’. That is a quote from a letter from Ângelo de Lima (1872-1921) to Professor Miguel Bombarda. This poet spent several years in psychiatric hospitals Conde de Ferreira in Porto and Rilhafoles in Lisbon where he was a patient of Bombarda and would later die. His ‘Complete Poems’ was published in 1971 and he was an author our father always greatly appreciated as well as a clinical case he studied; in 1974 he won the Sandoz Award in Psychiatry with ‘Madness and Artistic Creation: Ângelo de Lima, Orpheus poet’, a paper he presented to the Portuguese Society of Neurology and Psychiatry.

The letters that can be read here are unabridged transcripts of the originals, bar the correction of gaffes and orthographic updates. We decided to omit a few names by using letters instead of their initials in order to avoid causing offense to any mentioned individuals or their families.
The notes we present somewhat contextualise the times and explain some references made in the letters such as mythological figures, some characters and quotes. More extensive notes than these would be possible but we chose not to do them. We think that the relevance of these letters goes far beyond identifying every quote, poem, book or author mentioned, and we leave space for readers to discover them if they so wish.

The glossary deals with language relating to Africa, the war and some jargon used in the letters. The first occurrence of each word is marked with an asterisk so that the reader can find its meaning as they read.

This is the book of the love of our parents, the one we were born of and in which we take great pride. We were born out of two people, unusual in every sense, whom only in part we reveal to you in these letters. The rest belongs to us.

Maria José Lobo Antunes
Joana Lobo Antunes
Lisbon, March 2005
ANTÓNIO LOBO ANTUNES

António Lobo Antunes was born in Lisbon in 1942. Graduated as a doctor and practiced psychiatry.

In 1971 Lobo Antunes had to serve with the Portuguese Army to take part in the Colonial War (1961–1974). He came back from Africa in 1973. The Colonial War was the subject of many of his novels.

In 1979, Lobo Antunes published his first two novels, *Memória de Elefante* and *Os Cus de Judas*. Lobo Antunes has published more than 30 books and has been recognized with several awards. His work has been translated and published all over the world.

He continues to write.
1971. António Lobo Antunes life is brutally interrupted when he is drafted into the Portuguese Army to serve as a doctor in one of the worst zones of the Colonial War – the East of Angola. Away from everything dear he writes letters to his wife while he is immersed in an increasingly violent setting. While he moves between several military posts he falls in love for Africa and matures politically. At his side, an entire generation struggles and despairs for the return home. In the uncertainty of war events, only the letters can make him survive.
DIRECTOR’S NOTE

This note was written prior to the production of the film.

It was dawn and I was arriving from a journey. I opened the house front door and while I was walking to my bedroom I noticed that from inside of it echoed my wife’s voice: she was reading to our baby, still in her belly, a love letter.

That letter was part of a book that consisted of the full transcription of the letters written by a young doctor during his military service in Angola in the period from 1971 to 1973, in the peak of the Portuguese Colonial War. All letters were addressed to his pregnant wife who was waiting for him in Lisbon. The letters were overflowing with passion and disorientation: their lives had been brutally interrupted by a war that they barely understood, forcing them to leave behind the start of a shared life as a passionate couple and young parents.

The letters also described some of the five hundred men, mainly aged eighteen to twenty, which embarked with the author on an African odyssey in one of the worst war zones of that time.

The book is “António Lobo Antunes, D’Este Viver Aqui Neste Papel Descripto, Cartas da Guerra” edited by my friend Maria José Lobo Antunes and her sister Joana Lobo Antunes, daughters of the recipient of the letters who had expressed her will that they were to be published as a book after her death. And so that was done in 2005.

For the writing of the film script, Edgar Medina (the co-writer) and me undertook an intensive investigation. We interviewed former combatants who were “characters” of those letters and of the novels and chronicles where António Lobo Antunes approached his military service experience. We consulted hundreds of documents, photographs, field reports, military archives, etc. As we moved forward in the investigation we started to know more intimately some of the thousands of men who kept silent about their histories of the Colonial War because, deep down, very few would want to listen to them.

The film project “Letters from War” gravitates between the action of the young doctor and his battalion, his odyssey and misadventures and, in parallel, the off-screen reading of his letters that portray a kind of inner life. These two levels aren’t synchronous and establish a relation of complementarity between the brutality and inevitability of war and an attempt to “escape” to the life António had in Lisbon, close to his pregnant wife.

The film inherits the universe of the narrative of the book and a dramaturgy naturally arisen from the chronology of the letters, a reality that is fascinating and extremely cinematographic. Even
the mail exchanged via the Military Postal Service, which is a central component of the film, is not actually a normal letter but an “aerograma”: a small yellow sheet of paper which was cut and folded so that after closed could become a postage-paid envelope offered by the Portuguese Airline (TAP) in order to promote the communication between the military men and their families.

The many characters appearing in the film give back a choral sense, which a collective History calls for. They could also have written the letters we hear in the background. In these characters we will feel the fraternity, the friendship and loyalty of the men and their enduring capacity to survive monstrous physical and psychological situations. And in that we will sense a Country agonizing at the hands of a fascist regime.

Each one of these young men whose lives were amputated, as well as all the other 800.000 men who served in the Portuguese Army during the thirteen years of the war, left behind families, wives, fiancés, friends, lovers. An entire Country was silenced, and thus helped silencing an entire episode of its History. Making this film is also claiming the memory of this men and the infamy they were exposed to during and after the war. A claim that could be made also in memory of so many other innocent men throughout the world whose lives were destroyed by the stupidity of organized violence.

I already live with the faces and with the voices of the men who will be the characters, with the sound of the engines, the shaking of the zinc rooftops, with the African huts, the dances, and the wind that blows from the savannah to the bush. As I felt in the description by the writer and his comrades of war, I wanted some scenes to be developed in a brutal and astonishing way, and some sequences to be submerged in trance and agony. On the other hand, the film is overflowing with an admirable romantic and musical universe with songs from Portuguese stars from the 60’s and 70’s.

A wild love story, a tragic story of war, and a biographic film about the internationally most important Portuguese writer alive, all of these elements seem fascinating and exciting to me.

I now return to the bedroom where my wife, on the bed, reads the book of letters to the baby in her belly and I think that the last thing I would want, was our life to be as brutally interrupted as the life of this man and woman that I want so much to tell you about.

Ivo M. Ferreira
November, 2010
CAST

António  Miguel Nunes
Maria José  Margarida Vila-Nova
Major M.  Ricardo Pereira
Captain  João Pedro Vaz
2nd Lieutenant Eleutério  Simão Cayatte
Corporal Hilário  Isac Graça
Corporal Carica  Francisco Hestnes Ferreira
2nd Lieutenant Teacher  João Pedro Mamede
Soldier Ferreira  Tiago Aldeia
Catolo  Orlando Sérgio
# CREW

<table>
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<tr>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Ivo M. Ferreira</td>
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<td>Screenplay</td>
<td>Ivo M. Ferreira &amp; Edgar Medina</td>
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<tr>
<td>DOP</td>
<td>João Ribeiro</td>
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<td>Sound</td>
<td>Ricardo Leal</td>
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<td>Nuno G. Mello</td>
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<td>Assistant Director</td>
<td>João Pinhão</td>
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<td>Editor</td>
<td>Sandro Aguilar</td>
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<td>Mix</td>
<td>Tiago Matos</td>
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<td>Paulo Américo</td>
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<td>Production Manager</td>
<td>Joaquim Carvalho</td>
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<td>Co-producers</td>
<td>Georges Schoucair &amp; Michel Merkt</td>
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<td>Producers</td>
<td>Luís Urbano &amp; Sandro Aguilar</td>
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IVO M. FERREIRA was born in Lisbon in 1975. The taste for cinema comes very soon: after finishing high school in an Arts School, with a Photography and Audiovisual Communication diploma, he enrolls at the London Film School and the University of Budapest, and then starts traveling.

On a trip through Asia, he gets to Macau, where he directs and produces his first documentary. He is then invited by EXPO98 to direct a second film.

A brief but remarkable passage through Angola in 2000, while working with the Elinga Theater, arises his interest for the country and PALOPS, where he directs anthropological documentaries. Besides shorts and documentaries, Ivo directed two feature films: APRIL SHOWERS in 2009, premiered at Rotterdam Film Festival and EM VOLTA (2002) presented in Bangkok International Film Festival.

He currently lives in Macau, P.R. of China, which is reflected in his former film ON THE DRAGON’s FLAKE made for Guimarães 2012 - European Capital of Culture.

**LETTERS FROM WAR is his third feature film and biggest project.**

**FILMOGRAPHY**

- *Na Escama do Dragão* (Short, 2013)
- *O Estrangeiro* (Short, 2010)
- *Águas Mil* (Feature, 2009)
- *Vai Com o Vento* (Documentary, 2009)
- *Fios de Fiar* (Documentary, 2006)
- *Salto em Barreira* (Short, 2004)
- *À Procura de Sabino* (Documentary, 2003)
- *Soia di Príncipe* (Documentary, 2003)
- *Em Volta* (Feature, 2002)
- *Angola em Cena* (Documentary, 2001)
- *O Que Foi?* (Short, 1998)
- *O Homem da Bicicleta - Diário de Macau* (Documentary, 1997)
Cast - MARGARIDA VILA-NOVA
MARIA JOSÉ

Margarida Vila-Nova made her first appearance at age 6, in 1988, in the film Dédé by Jean Louis Benoît, and has been acting since then.

On stage, she got known with the play Teenage Confessions (Confissões de Adolescente) (2002), which she produced and in which she stared. She took part in plays by authors like Shakespeare, Heinrich von Kleist, Luísa Costa Gomes or Frederico Garcia Lorca, author of the last theatrical performance in which she acted The Public, awarded with the 2013 Portuguese Golden Globe for Best Play.

She is best known for her TV carrier in several soap operas and TV films. Her last role was as Leonor in Mar Salgado screened on TV (SIC) in 2014 and 2015.

FILMOGRAPHY (selective)

- Mistérios de Lisboa, Raul Ruiz (2010)
- Filme do Desassossego, João Botelho (2010)
- Corrupção, João Botelho (2007)
- A Falha, José Mário Grilo (2000)
Cast - MIGUEL NUNES
ANTÓNIO

Born in 1988. He began his career as a TV actor at age 12. He then became known as part of the cast of the most popular Portuguese TV show Morangos com Açúcar.

In 2009 he joined the acting school Escola Superior de Teatro e Cinema, where he obtained a degree in Theatre - Acting.

He was part of the leading cast in the feature film Swan (Cisne) by acclaimed Portuguese director Teresa Villaverde, for which he won the Young Talent Award at Lisbon & Estoril Film Festival ‘11. Afterwards he worked with directors such as João Pedro Rodrigues and Dinis Costa.

In 2015 Miguel Nunes participated in Berlinale Talents.

FILMOGRAPHY (selective)

- A Rapariga das Luvas Brancas, João Botelho (2016)
- O Fantasma do Novais, Margarida Gil (2012)
- Cisne, Teresa Villaverde (2010)
- E o Tempo Passa, Alberto Seixas Santos (2009)
- O Que Há de Novo no Amor?, Hugo Martins (2009)
O SOM E A FÚRIA – Production Company

O Som e a Fúria was created in 1998 and has a strong international focus; co-productions with countries including France, Germany, Brazil, Uruguay and Switzerland have proven key to the internationalisation of the company. It has co-produced films by internationally renowned directors including ARABIAN NIGHTS, a Portuguese-French-German-Swiss trilogy by Miguel Gomes that screened in the Directors’ Fortnight at Cannes in 2015 and which won the Sydney Film Prize, as well as Gomes’ critically acclaimed TABU, which won the Alfred Bauer and FIPRESCI awards at the 2012 Berlinale. French-Portuguese GEBO AND THE SHADOW (Manoel de Oliveira, 2012) won the Special Jury Award at Abu Dhabi Film Festival, Joao Pedro Plácido’s (BE)LONGING won a Gold Hugo for Best Documentary at Chicago in 2015, among others.

O Som e a Furia’s production LETTERS FROM WAR by Ivo M. Ferreira is screening in Competition at the 2016 Berlinale.

FILMOGRAPHY (selective)

- Cartas da Guerra, Ivo Ferreira (Feature, 2016)
- Eldorado XXI, Salomé Lamas (Documentary, 2016)
- John From, João Nicolau (Feature, 2015)
- As Mil e Uma Noites, Miguel Gomes (Feature, 2015)
- Volta à Terra, João Pedro Plácido (Documentary, 2014)
- Campo de Flamingos sem Flamingos, André Príncipe (Documentary, 2013)
- Terra de Ninguém, Salomé Lamas (Documentary, 2012)
- O Gebo e a Sombra, Manoel de Oliveira (Feature, 2012)
- Tabu, Miguel Gomes (Feature, 2012)
- A Espada e a Rosa, João Nicolau (Feature, 2010)
- A Religiosa Portuguesa, Eugène Green (Feature, 2009)
- Ruínas, Manuel Mozos (Documentary, 2009)
- Aquele Querido Mês de Agosto, Miguel Gomes (Feature, 2008)
- A Zona, Sandro Aguilar (Feature, 2008)
- A Cara que Mereces, Miguel Gomes (Feature, 2004)
I believe the idea for this film came when you heard someone close to you reading love letters written by a second lieutenant, during the war, to his wife. Was the film born from a life parallel and especially an oral dimension?

I wanted to work on the Portuguese Colonial War, I just didn’t know how or when. One day, I came home from a trip and heard my wife reading those “Letters from War” by António Lobo Antunes to her belly, where my son Martim still was. I like storytellers and thought it was a beautiful story to tell and turn into a film: a ravishing love that was bearing its fruit — a pregnancy — while it was being brutally interrupted by a State, in 1971, that pushed husbands and sons into a war (almost) no one could believe in. Its heroes built their own political conscience and the young doctor turned into a writer. The chorus would tell of a people’s suffering and a country that had been thrown, one way or the other, into a stupid, unfair and absolutely incomprehensible war. That way, through a biographical and historical portrait, I could dare to tell something about Portugal’s recent history, something no one likes to talk about.

Was it also a way to show the strength of that love, through those words, despite the physical distance between them?

The letters and the film show a young army doctor turn into one of the biggest writers of all time — António Lobo Antunes —, but the apparently missing character, his wife Maria José, who receives his letters (or aerograms), is very much present in the book, in the script and in the film. I found that absent but yet present element very interesting to work with and learned a lot with it while working on the film. The space between someone writing a letter and someone reading it — a sort of deadlock space — eventually gives birth to a sort of intermediate character (a nomenclature given to me by stage director João Brites). Maria José’s images are also, therefore, António’s own projections: his thoughts, his dreams, his memories. But Maria José is also a real character with a real body, even though it seems to be difficult to touch her, as she appears to be both connected and disconnected with the camera. That is probably the situation I most enjoy discovering in the film. So I filmed her as someone about to disappear, someone we’d find down the paths of a memory created by those words in the letters.

The film can be described as a war film because there is a war in it — one that actually happened. There is nevertheless something very strong in it: the idea of wanting to find life. Was this something that propelled you into making this film?

The “raft letters” were one of the things that interested me the most. To see someone that has to invent a world and create a bond so that his life can go on and he can survive. No one gives up on life if he has to fight for it every hour, every day. I didn’t go through a war, but I think I kind of understand it. I was also interested in the soldier’s evolution in that context: someone going forwards and backwards, in two years of war, but who was also growing up. This is the story of someone becoming a writer and a man at the same time. After all, he is growing up during a war and that interested me: to see someone dealing with that situation and eventually finding a political stance in it, but also his own will to live and to write in a desperate situation. One of the most important things in my preparation was how to work with someone else’s intimacy — a couple and their real love letters.
When making an adaptation, even though it may stay true to its source material, one cannot avoid using his own views on it.

The film is my interpretation of how I see all of this. We used the black and white to create a distance filter over the reality of the source material and the idea of taking over its substance. It was necessary in order to turn it into my film.

**How did the collaboration with António Lobo Antunes and his family go?**

It’s something that we’ve lived through together and will keep on living with. That was the only possible way to do it for everyone. I could only make the film with Maria José and Joana’s consent — António Lobo Antunes daughters —, otherwise I would never have done it. Me, my co-writer Edgar Medina and the producers worked under that premise and were aware of the importance and delicacy of it all. That was our commitment: to work with sympathy and elegance. Details from daily life were also included, such as the way António organizes his cigarettes when he’s writing, for instance. On the other hand, these weren’t secret intimate letters, I was working from a book that had been published.

**How long did you shoot in Angola?**

We prepared the shooting for about four weeks and then shot for a little over a month. It was very hard. Almost anything you could imagine happened during the shooting.

**The “war film” is an established genre in film history. I believe you prepared yourself by seeing other films in order to understand what you would want to do or not. There is an element of beauty in this film, it seems you were careful enough to look for it in the midst of war. But that can also be a dangerous idea. How careful were you not to aestheticise it?**

To aestheticise is something I don’t believe in. The beauty you mentioned comes from committing to a subject in an elegant way and how you shoot it, being in love with it and with life itself. One must be careful with a few things, such as art direction, shooting quick and more fragmented situations, or showing historical and visual elements that can be easily identified. Things may turn into a cliché. I wanted to make a film about war but I didn’t want to shoot traditional scenes with someone shooting from one side and someone else shooting from the other side… The references I had in mind, in this case, are pretty much universal. Terrence Malick, of course, and the use of voice-over, “Tabu” by Miguel Gomes, for the way it looks at Africa and uses black and white, documentaries on the Portuguese Colonial War, “Apocalypse Now”… There are a few things they have in common with our work in this film, mainly because of their characters’ inner journeys. But I never wanted to imitate anything nor do I appreciate stylistic exercises. From the moment I’m doing something, I don’t think of anything else. I made this film as if it were my last one, every day.

**What drives this film is essentially the letters.**

Absolutely, but also the research we did with people that were in that battalion, doing many interviews, and by researching in military archives.
It seems you also worked around the idea of distance, not only in the love letters between two people who are in love, but also because that soldier is not by himself — he is surrounded by others. Each soldier has its own distance: either from a loved one or an image of their own country which in fact no longer exists.

Precisely. I wanted to show the agony and collective drama of a whole country. The film was also inspired by people who were actually there — people who’d never seen a car before they were recruits and were now facing a war situation. How can you take someone from their life and put them in such a situation? We can hear Marcello Caetano’s voice [the last prime-minister of the Estado Novo regime, 1968-1974] in the film calling on his men to defend their homeland against its enemies. But it was already very difficult to defend this idea in 1971. Probably many people felt that the country became a disgrace to itself. I believe many things can be transposed to the present. I’m forty years old. These letters were written three years before I was born. It is time to tackle this topic and think and talk about what happened.

That’s a feature of all your films — as if we’re looking at the history of a country through the history of those character’s feelings.

Yes. I wanted the character who wrote those letters to mix with other soldiers. They eventually end up resembling each other. They are all living in the same situation, like the population of one country. But the film then takes us into a situation that could belong either to their past or their future, a situation that plays a game with what they’ve lived in the past, how they’re living in the present, and what they long for in the future.

Even though there’s a feeling of farewell, as well as one of solitude and distance in these men, there’s also that feeling of hope. What do you think ends up saving them?

Survival, hope.

And love?

Yes. The only bond to life comes from those love letters, as if they were the only living thing on earth. When facing a desperate situation — and we’ve all been through one —, we fight back. When people must cling to life in order to survive, they hope to meet again their loved one.

Like that scene where a soldier starts singing Puccini’s “Un bel di vedremo”.

Yes. Human beings have an extraordinary capacity of survival. There are many things I haven’t seen, many others I’m not even aware of. Only they know. The Puccini scene came from a story told to me by someone who belonged to that battalion. Many other things completed the essence of the film, that is, the letters: Lobo Antunes’ books, his chronicles, stories from his comrades. There is a different war for each person, each memory is different. No one talks about the war while they’re engaged in it. That’s the way things were dealt with politically, without any debate. For me, it was an opportunity to tackle the subject and turn it into a Portuguese film, as well as a film of mine. After all, it is a realistic film.
Love letters always have a timeless and romantic side to them, but here, they come from a very particular situation. To film war in a realistic way, in your adaptation, is a fair tribute to its original source.

I worked with the actors so that they’d have some contact with military commanders, with combat situations, or at least so they’d know how to grab a gun. I asked them to write aerograms to their loved ones and to write back with their own names on it. I wanted them to have their own world inside their heads and to know the world we were working on. We spoke to each other about the characters that were being devised in the film and they got to know each other better. They were all attracted to the story and to its historical context. I started to film with an unrelenting will to move forward and face things in a very harsh situation. When doing this film, I enjoyed this feeling of wanting to shoot and not being afraid. I’m happy that the film managed to keep that productive energy, that it found its theme and story, and that it has developed its own contemporary impact.

That’s the only way cinema lives.

Exactly.

Interview by Francisco Valente

Lisbon, January 2016
PRODUCTION
O Som e a Fúria
Lisbon, Portugal
+351 21 358 25 18
geral@osomeafuria.com

WORLD SALES
The Match Factory
Cologne, Germany
+49 221 5397090
info@matchfactory.de

INTERNATIONAL PRESS @ BERLINALE
Wolfgang W. Werner Public Relations
Christiane Leithardt & Wolfgang Werner
Munich, Germany
phone +49 89 38 38 67 0
info@werner-pr.de

IN BERLIN
Christiane Leithardt
cell +49 175 588 80 86
Wolfgang Werner
cell +49 170 333 93 53
info@werner-pr.de

MIDDLE EAST DISTRIBUTION
MC Distribution
Omar El Kady
oelkadi@mcdistribution.me

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