



THE HISTORY OF WORLD LITERATURES **ON FILM**

THE HISTORY OF SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN **LITERATURES** ON FILM

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B L O O M S B U R Y

**(Re)imagining Maria, (Re)writing Angola's Revolutionary (His)stories:
Sarah Maldoror's *Sambizanga* as Afro-Feminist Film Adaptation, or 'Rebellious
Rewriting,' of *The Real Life of Domingos Xavier***

Abstract

This article analyses the ways in which Sarah Maldoror's film *Sambizanga* (1972) adapts Jose Luandino Vieira's novella *The Real Life of Domingos Xavier* (1971), shifting the original text's emphasis away from a communal painting of political struggle against the Portuguese administration. Vieira chooses to marginalise the character Maria, using her as a vehicle by which to mourn and consequently glorify the martyrdom of her dissident husband, whereas Maldoror focuses on Maria's individuality by making the widow her film's protagonist. I use Obioma Nnaemeka's 'nego-feminism' theory (2004) to "negotiate" a variety of ideas surrounding feminism and adaptation that characterise *Sambizanga's* sophisticated themes and style (Weathers 1969, Bartlett 2004, Dovey 2009, Tcheuyap 2015). Maldoror's pioneering Afrocentric feminist style of film adaptation is thus articulated as 'proto-nego-feminist,' or, in other words, a 'rebellious rewriting' of Angola's revolutionary (his)stories.

The images included in the final version of this chapter are courtesy of Sarah Maldoror's daughters: Annouchka de Andrade and Henda Ducados. Thank you.

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In January 1961, a rebellion known as 'Maria's War' signalled the beginning of the end for Portugal's Empire in Angola. Members of a Christian Sect known as 'Maria' commenced a campaign of economic sabotage in north-central Angola, yet a formidable Portuguese counterinsurgency controlling both air and ground forces eventually quelled the resistance, killing approximately seven thousand Angolans over the course of two months. Despite the initial failure of the uprising, a series of anticolonial attacks in Luanda and Northern Angola were inspired by the sacrifices of the 'Maria' martyrs, and the Portuguese regime was still addressing pressures and problems caused by the first wave of rebels when large groups of predominantly untrained and poorly-armed Angolans attacked an army barracks and a prison in Luanda on February 4th 1961.

Although Stephen L. Weigert classifies February's events as the official beginning of Angola's War of Independence on the basis that consequent acts of rebellion that spread across the nation were inspired by the uprising (Weigert 2011: 1-14), the brave souls who expressed similarly remarkable levels of courage during 'Maria's War' must not be forgotten. Indeed, in the spirit of remembering marginalised 'Maria' figures within the context of Angola's rich and remarkable histories of resistance, one must recognise and thus explore the representation of a character named Maria in one of Angolan cinema's most important revolution-themed films: the ground-breaking *Sambizanga* (1972), directed by the pioneering filmmaker Sarah Maldoror (1929-2020).

Before and for a period after *Sambizanga*'s initial release, Angolan cinema was primarily comprised of documentary films. Indeed, filmic adaptations of literature within the context of Angolan cinema are generally a much more recent phenomenon, illustrated by the 2015 adaption José Eduardo Agualusa's *O Venededor de Passados* (2004) by Brazilian director Lula Buarque de Hollanda. However, early Lusophone filmmakers did produce "a cinema that exposed the horrors of continued Portuguese rule," thus the first films of Angola and Mozambique contribute a special body of work to broader African cinema frameworks that was conceived and developed with the contexts of revolution (Moorman 2001: 107).

INSERT: Figure 1: Sarah Maldoror on the set of *Sambizanga*

It is therefore unsurprising that Maldoror's debut film *Sambizanga* is a revolutionary moment in the story of filmmaking for a variety of reasons. As well as signifying the first feature-length film directed in Angola and Lusophone Africa *and* the first feature-length film in Africa directed by a black woman, *Sambizanga* is also the first a feature length film adaptation of *The Real Life of Domingos Xavier* (1971), a novella written by José Luandino Vieira (1935-Present). While novella was written towards the end of Portugal's control of Angola, Joseph Gugler argues that *Sambizanga* echoes the politicised tone of Vieira's story by exploring: "the militancy of the [Angolan] struggle that was well under way when the film was produced" (Gugler 1999: 83). However, when Gugler posits that *The Real Life of Domingos Xavier* emphasises "the victimisation that justifies rebellion," he refers to 'rebellion' in broad political terms, exploring the ways in which citizens assist the revolutionary group *Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola*¹ by challenging the oppressive Portuguese administration through a variety of disruptive actions. Dissimilarly,

¹ For the remainder of this chapter, the group's name will be shortened to: MPLA.

Sambizanga deconstructs victimisation on a localised, personal scale, exemplifying the director's desire to give voices to "women who struggle" (Maldoror 1966: 46).

Sambizanga's adaptation of the novella thus offers a detailed examination of Maria's journey across colonised spaces as she refuses to be overwhelmed by a grave injustice: the incarceration of her lover, Domingos Xavier.

Maldoror asserts a type of resistance which contests stereotypical gender roles and hegemonic societal expectations. *Sambizanga* resembles aspects of Elizabeth Bartlett's contemporary brand of 'rebellious feminism' through the manner in which the film extracts a heartbroken woman's story of resilience from the novella's call for political mobilisation and thereby "refuses oppression and affirms human dignity" (Bartlett 2004: 59). Although the film was released almost thirty years before this 'rebellious feminism' theory was conceptualised, Bartlett's 'rebellious feminism' theory relies heavily on the work of Albert Camus, especially the idea that: "Rebellious thought... is a perpetual state of tension" (Camus 1951: 22). While Camus was born in Algeria during the area's status as a French colony, the philosopher identified as French, thus 'rebellious feminism' exists in a "perpetual state of tension" through its influences from Europe *and* North Africa, the Global North *and* the Global South. Similarly, although one may turn to strands of second-wave feminism from the 1960s and 70s as alternative means of navigating *Sambizanga*'s representations of Maria (Freidan 1963, Firestone 1970, Millet 1970), locating Maldoror's work within these frameworks risks homogenising and whitewashing her work through a Western-centric approach, ignoring the voices of myriad women of colour who have shaped and influenced the feminist movement's various trajectories.

At the same time as dissent was escalating in Angola, the feminist movement likewise underwent a revolutionary turn, shifting away from its white and middle-class strains towards frameworks that sought to empower black female voices across international territories. Mary Ann Weathers's foundational text for black feminism – *An Argument for Black Women's Liberation as a Revolutionary Force* – was published in the radical feminist magazine *No More Fun and Games* in February 1969, declaring: “women's liberation should be considered as a strategy for an eventual tie-up with the entire revolutionary movement consisting of women, men and children” (Weathers 1969: Vol. 1, No. 2). The treatise calls for unity across national territories by stating: “all women suffer oppression... but we do have females' oppression in common. This means we can begin to talk to other women with this common factor and start building links with them and thereby build and transform the revolutionary force we are now beginning to amass.” Weathers undermines her work with the factually incorrect assertion that American women will struggle to reclaim their African heritages because “African tribes live communally.. [and] refute not only patriarchy and matriarchy, but our entire family structure as we know it.” However, despite this vague smearing of Africa's cultures, the global vision underpinning *An Argument for Black Women's Liberation as a Revolutionary Force* is a vital component that nuances ensuing frameworks of black feminism.

Although *Sambizanga* shares with Weathers's theory a desire to negate the unjust marginalisation of black women through revolutionary means, Maldoror's Afrocentric focus demands an exploration of African strands of feminism. Indeed, Obioma Nnaemeka's theorisation of ‘nego-feminism’ (2004) arrived long after *Sambizanga* was created, yet her arguments articulate an effective framework within which to situate Maldoror's visionary feminist film adaptation of *The Real of Domingos Xavier*. Nnaemeka's early research

observes that: “to meaningfully explain the phenomenon called African feminism, it is not to Western feminism but rather to the African environment that one must refer” (Nnaemeka 1998: 9). ‘Nego-feminism’ thus stands for: “the feminism of negotiation” as well as “no ego” because “the foundation of shared values in many African cultures are the principles of negotiation, give and take, compromise, and balance” (Nnaemeka 2004: 377-378). One can adopt Nnaemeka’s theory as means of uniting the most important aspects of various other feminist frameworks while, crucially, retaining an Afrocentric element at the heart of the ensuing theoretical constructions. Throughout this chapter, I will therefore situate Maldoror’s film within the context of ‘nego-feminism’ and Nnaemeka’s ideals of selflessness and negotiation, drawing from the revolutionary energy with which Weathers’s text is charged while, simultaneously, harnessing Bartlett’s rebellious desire to challenge patriarchal structures and affirm *all* forms of human dignity across myriad cultural borders.

Sambizanga’s representations of Maria illustrate that revolutionaries must recognise the plights of Angolan women in order to successfully actualise Angola’s emancipation, thereby framing women’s liberation as an integral component of the revolutionary movement’s fundamental cause. While Bartlett and Weathers’s arguments do not directly address the plight of Angolan women suffering at the hands of the Portuguese regime, their understanding that women of all colours share forms of oppression (which may be synthesised and transformed into rebellious action for the combined liberation of men, women and children alike) articulates certain dimensions of *Sambizanga*’s feminist outlook. The sophistication of Maldoror’s ground-breaking film thus forms the raw elements of a broad range of future feminist theories, or exemplifies (for want of a better expression) ‘proto-nego-feminism.’

As well as recognising latent elements of black feminism in *Sambizanga*, it is imperative to acknowledge the filmic contexts within which Maldoror's work is situated. The filmmaker is often referred to as 'the Mother of African cinema' in response to director Ousmane Sembène's description as 'the Father of African cinema.' Although one cannot compare Maldoror's debut feature to previous filmic works directed by African women since *Sambizanga* established and revolutionised African women's filmmaking, one may cite Sembène's influence through the manner in which he pioneered African cinema on feminist grounds. His debut film *La Noire De...* [translation: *The Black Girl of...*] (1966) was the first feature-length work directed by an African person, and has been heralded as an exemplar for "male-authored feminist cinema" (Dovey 2012: 18) for the ways in which the Senegalese director represents the tribulations of a female house-servant from the character's own point of view. Indeed, over the years a variety of feminist discourses have emerged throughout Sembène's revolutionary oeuvre, cultivating his reputation as "a proponent of woman-centred narratives, a critic of patriarchy, and an advocate of women's rights" (Ciecko 2017: 238). Importantly, a large proportion of Sembène's works – such as *La Noire De...*, *Xala* (1975) and *Guelwaar* (1992) – are adaptations of his own novels and short stories, thereby indicating a certain tendency among directors since African filmmaking's inception to imbue filmic adaptations of literature with feminist ideologies.

As previously discussed, a particular style of Lusophone filmmaking born in and shaped by revolutionary contexts emerged in the early 1970s as Angola and Mozambique sought to gain their independence. Joaquim Lopes Barbosa's *Deixem-Me Ao Menos Subir Às Palmeiras* was released in the same year as *Sambizanga*, depicting a Mozambican woman's rape by a black foreman as the moment of outrage that inspires a colony to rebel against its oppressors. As well as adapting a piece of fiction in order to "rewrite" patriarchal (his)stories about

Mozambican colonialism, the film humanises the attacked woman and explores her situation, echoing *Sambizanga*'s attempts to address "the brutal suppression of poor Black people... [who] have felt the scourge the male-superiority-oriented society" (Weathers 1969: Vol. 1., No.2). Barbosa's film shares with *Sambizanga* a desire to develop women's stories in relation to the broader revolutionary causes within which oppressed women are situated, illustrating that national liberation is fundamentally connected to securing freedom for the men *and* women who find themselves suppressed.

While straddling Sembène and Barbosa's important African films of rebellion in both feminist and decolonial terms, *Sambizanga* also draws on influences from beyond the African continent. From 1961-62 Maldoror studied filmmaking in Moscow with Sembène, and in 1966 she worked as an assistant for Gillo Pontecorvo's revolution-themed thriller *The Battle of Algiers* (1966). As will be discussed in further depth throughout this chapter, her adaptation of *The Real Life of Domingos Xavier* represents a site of transnational intersection between a variety of films and filmmakers. By repurposing stylistic techniques from the works of Vittorio de Sica and Jean-Luc Godard and thereby channelling the thematic preoccupations of Sembène and Pontecorvo, Maldoror attempts to construct a revolution-themed film freed from the constraints of the patriarchy. The filmmaker thus foregrounds the character Maria, whose role, in same vein as Maldoror the filmmaker, is often neglected when scrutinising Angola's tumultuous period of revolution and change. Maldoror conveys in audiovisual terms in the diegetic universe of *Sambizanga*, and, at the same, through her ground-breaking career in the world beyond the screen, a ground-breaking vision for decolonised societies that rejects the previous models which are deeply male-centred.

Figure 2: In *Sambizanga*, Domingos Xavier is interrogated by the Portuguese officials

Alexie Tcheuyap characterises filmic adaptations of Francophone African literature as a ‘rewriting’ of historical narratives that hegemonize certain (post)colonial discourses (2015). While early cinematic representations of Africa were distorted by imperial forces “to meet the colonial hegemonic discourse[s]” that legitimised the subjugation of African people at the hands of white supremacists, eventually colonialists became “afraid that Africans could use subversive images to promote radical social transformations” and thereby counteract the colonial camera’s misrepresentations of Africa (Tcheuyap 2015: 38-39). Maldoror’s *Sambizanga* thus exhibits the ‘subversive’ content that Portuguese colonials feared, juxtaposing the harshness of colonial enforcement against Maria’s dignified, resilient actions.

While Frantz Fanon argues that “decolonisation is always a violent phenomenon” (Fanon 1961: 27), Maldoror focuses on the moments where processes of anti-colonial response may transcend violence, or, instead, do not automatically necessitate aggressive responses in retaliation to the violence of colonisers. Crucially, the ‘radical’ nature of *Sambizanga*’s black feminist, anti-imperialist content exemplifies a certain tendency in Sub-Saharan African cinema “to exorcise and explain violence” by adapting African literatures to film “in a way that either the taking up of arms or solely rational, disembodied discussion cannot” (Dovey 2009: 277). The rebellious qualities of Maldoror’s film adaptation stem from her explorations of violence in a non-violent way, her refusal to adhere to the stereotypical cinematic misrepresentations of African citizens as “savage[s]” or “threatening black native[s]” on which racist films of the continent’s colonisers thrive (Ukadike 1990: 31). However, Maldoror’s representations of Maria do not ignore the fact that violence was committed on both sides of the Angola-Portugal divide, and the film’s conclusion implies that Domingos’s death motivates the MPLA to launch an overdue attack. In this sense, Lindiwe Dovey’s theorisation of African film adaptation as a form of retributive justice

allows Maldoror “to rewrite history... [and counteract] ongoing cycles of violence” without, vitally, “de-historicizing the use of force” which is represented as necessary for the Angolan nationals to overthrow the Portuguese regime (Dovey 2009: 277). Maldoror’s film refuses to delegitimise the MPLA’s forceful actions and, simultaneously, demonstrates that Maria’s non-violent role in pursuing her husband’s disappearance as protector of her family plays an important, unignorable part in the broader context of Angola’s decolonisation.

In light of the complex and overlapping strands of feminism and adaptation theories which compete and contest in Maldoror’s film, throughout this chapter I will harness Nnaemeka’s “negotiation” and “no ego” ideals in order to combine the rebellious and unruly qualities of Bartlett, Weathers, Tcheuyap and Dovey’s respective arguments, thereby articulating the ‘rebellious rewriting’ taking place through *Sambizanga*’s retelling of *The Real Life of Domingos Xavier*. By exploring the ways in which the rebellious spirit of various Afrocentric feminist perspectives may align with Angola’s broad concerns for nationwide resistance to Portugal, Maldoror’s ‘rebellious rewriting’ of Vieira’s Lusophonic work resists the oppressive (his)torical trajectories of our male-dominated societies, refusing to marginalise women’s roles during times of revolution and societal upheaval. Ultimately, I argue that Maldoror’s particular style of black feminist film adaptation, a ‘rebellious rewriting’ or ‘proto-nego-feminist’ adaptation of Vieira’s novella, illustrates how intense periods of societal disruption present profound possibilities for social change if, crucially, one makes the brave decision to challenge and thereby revise the biased (his)stories that have emerged from the patriarchal civil structures of the world’s imperialist projects.

During the film project’s formative stages, Maldoror filmed *Sambizanga* in the Congo rather than Angola because the film’s criticism of the colonial project would have resulted in

governmental backlash. In this sense, Maldoror challenges the (his)torical framings of Angolan situation through a defiant act of (re)framing, using the signifying powers of fictional representation to inspire the imagination through film and, at the same time, to negotiate obstacles presented by the Portuguese forces. Similarly, Vieira was a socially-conscious and politically-active artist who sought to challenge the regime through the communicative and inspirational powers of his literary art, needing to evade the oppressive authorities on numerous occasions.

A pioneer of an Angolan model for literature that attempts “to depart from accultured literary language and models” (Reisman 1987: 69), Vieira’s anti-colonial ideologies – from staunch defences of Angolan cultural heritage to fierce criticisms of the imperial administration – feature prominently throughout his oeuvre, oftentimes resulting in his incarceration by the domineering Portuguese regime (Rassner 1982, Reisman 1987, dos Santos 2014). Although Maldoror and Vieira both dedicated large portions of their lives to raising awareness about human injustices, Vieira transparently champions the revolutionary movement and the cause of the MPLA in *The Real Life of Domingos Xavier* and through his own willingness to serve time in jail, whereas Maldoror’s *Sambizanga* explores the limitations of political movements in the wake of human suffering, avoiding jailtime in favour of influencing the minds and hearts of the Angolan people in non-violent ways.

Maldoror’s husband, the poet and activist Mário Pinto de Andrade, was a founder of the MPLA in 1956 and acted as a producer for *Sambizanga*. In the same manner as his wife, Andrade likewise sought to contribute to the anti-colonial struggle in ways that extended beyond the confinements of imprisonment. When the MPLA’s leader Agostinho Neto was arrested in 1960, Andrade was elected president of the group but resigned two years later

because Neto was released, demonstrating a willingness to put the revolutionary cause before his own personal needs. The pair eventually clashed and grew apart after arguing about the MPLA's growing authoritarian tendencies, and Andrade founded the dissident group *Active Revolut* in 1974. However, Andrade's understanding that contributions to the revolutionary cause may include and, in certain circumstances, extend beyond such transparent gestures as violent action and willing incarceration is mirrored by the sophisticated lens of his wife's film. While acutely aware of the Portuguese government's failings, Maldoror focuses on circumstances where heartbreak and pain depoliticise the suffering Maria, examining moments of tragedy when human experiences do not wholly centre around the formulaic mantras and rigid belief systems of political ideology.

Maldoror's first exploration in adapting literary material and 'rebelliously rewriting' Angolan revolutionary (his)stories originates in her work *Monangambee* (1969), a short film based in part on Vieira's *The Real Life of Domingos Xavier* in a similar manner to *Sambizanga*. *Monangambee* depicts a political prisoner brutally beaten after an exchange with his wife about preparing 'complet' – a staple dish in the Luandan slums that mixes beans, fish and bananas – is misinterpreted by the authorities as code for political rebellion. While the content of the film differs substantially from its source material, *Monangambee* balances the wife and husband's screen time as means of weaving a united depiction of Angolan resistance akin to the politicised tone of *The Real Life of Domingos Xavier*, leading Roy Armes to argue that the film is "totally committed to the independence struggle" (Armes 2008: 91). Although *Monangambee* does not expand the wife's role in the same manner as *Sambizanga*, the film's depiction of the prisoner's torture throughout the shortened audiovisual format creates an intense depiction of Angolan suffering at the hands of colonial barbarity, thereby marking Maldoror's first foray into revolutionary cinema and, at the same

time, her shrewd awareness of ‘rebelliously rewriting’ the narratives of Angolan women, foregrounding marginalised characters within the context of Portuguese oppression.

In the feature-length work *Sambizanga*, Maldoror explores the role of a prisoner’s wife during the time of Angolan colonialism in far more depth than her first short film, enlisting economist and amateur actress Elisa Andrade from *Monangambee* to play the part of Maria yet expanding Andrade’s screen time and nuancing the emotions and behaviours of her sophisticated character. When the bureaucratic powers feign ignorance in an effort to impede Maria’s investigations, the Angolan heroine resorts to wailing her husband’s name and disrupting the peace. Toneto, a treacherous *cipaio*², attempts to calm Maria by relaying her husband’s defiance during police interrogation, sentimentalising Domingo’s refusal to implicate his family, friends and the MPLA. In Vieira’s novella, Maria “hears the echo of the voice of her *companheiro*, Domingos Xavier, hammering away in her brain, like a pneumatic drill, and sounding in her heart: ‘I am not telling, I am not telling’” (Vieira 1979: 25). Her eyes are “open and calm” and she “no longer [feels] pain” (25), acquiescing at the thought of her husband’s resilience in the face of interrogation, his loyalty to the revolutionary cause. The word *companheiro* may mean “both a marriage partner and a work partner, particularly an ally in struggle” (Wolfers ii), thereby subtly imbuing Maria and Domingos’s espousal partnership with a political undercurrent at their relationship’s core.

Dissimilarly, Maria’s crocodile tears in *Sambizanga* are immediately replaced by untrammelled aggression directed at Toneto. Maldoror’s Maria is not satisfied by news of her husband’s words, scolding and protesting until Toneto drags her onto a bus to privately reveal Domingos’s location. In the novella, Domingos’s unflappable words reverberate throughout

² A *cipaio* is a native Angolan recruited to serve in a subordinate role to the Portuguese police.

Maria's entire being "like an echo to fill her heart" (25), his demonstration of political allegiance palliating all concerns for her husband's welfare. Contrastingly, using a bullish form of intelligence to manipulate the *cipaio*, the filmic Maria channels her passion for Domingos into productive action, honouring Domingo's strength during interrogation by pressurising spineless Toneto into divulging key knowledge.

By subverting Maria's characterisation in the novella as a passive political chess-piece heartened by her husband's loyalty to the MPLA, Maldoror's 'rebelliously rewrites' Maria's role from an acquiescent pawn to a strong, autonomous agent capable of adapting to difficult situations, using her tactical nous to manipulate the *cipaio* while, concurrently, channelling steely resilience akin to that displayed by her abducted lover's silence. Apart from Sembène, during this period African literature and cinema throughout sub-Saharan Africa was devoid of autonomous adaptable female character capable of agency and self-motivation. Although Irène d'Almedia's book *Francophone African Women Writers* (1994) details a wave of feminist authors who would similarly inspire Odile Cazenave's compendium *Rebellious Women* (1999), the key authors featured in the two texts are predominantly figures from the 1980s in the vein of Mariama Bâ from Senegal and Angèle Rawiri from Gabon. African cinema was therefore trailblazing in terms of producing rebellious Afro-feminist works *before* d'Almedia and Cazenave's generation of rebellious female novelists were writing, emphasising the pioneering, revolutionary qualities of Maldoror's filmic adaptation of *The Real Life of Domingos Xavier*.

Figure 3: Sarah Maldoror smokes a cigarette

In a scene tellingly omitted from *Sambizanga*, an apocalyptic thunderstorm strikes Vieira's version of Luanda after Maria leaves Mutamba Square's police station. Symbolising the

intensity of Maria's disappointment, a flash of lightning shoots through "the black sky," the storm "tore up great trunks of the fig trees," torrents of water commingle with sand so that "the water began to turn red" (52). However, by lighting "the darkened city" and ridding "the loose sand in the townships" with torrents of rainwater, the storm also symbolises Maria's resoluteness in the face of adversity, the empowering effects of enduring suffering in order to purge weakness.

Sambizanga's treatment of the Mutamba Square scene is nuanced differently. Maria recognises a physical disparity between her township and the modernised square: "not even all of our construction workers could fill these streets... so many people and houses..." (00:57:50-55). Omitting personal memories of friends that the literary Maria cherishes, Maldoror's Maria uses her practical knowledge of the construction team to understand the new environment. Leaving her guide for the police station, setting off alone into the unknown, Maldoror depicts the depths of Maria's resilience without the exaggeration of the novella's thunderstorm. In the storm's aftermath, Vieira notes that "friends and families would go and set to rights again these houses and huts, would bring materials for rebuilding... would obstinately go on with the struggle of life (54)," thereby emphasising the "collective basis of resistance and struggle" as a means of rousing militant action (Peres 1997: 32). Conversely, Maldoror omits grand Hollywood effects as she traces Maria walking towards the police station, rebuking Hollywood's histrionic editing techniques in order to capture Maria's unfair victimisation within a harsh politicised framework.

While Maldoror strives to depict Maria's self-governance and, in turn, the limits of her resilience, Vieira promotes the collective identity of his characters by emphasising Maria's dependence on other Angolan citizens, a support network tied to the country's precolonial

roots. Despite spending a night in Mr Cardoso's house, Vieira's Maria feels "very content in the unfamiliar hut, breathing the unfeigned affection of these friends, looking at Mama Terry, now older and fatter, who had borne so many children" (20). When Maria ventures from these huts, from the edge of the township to Luanda's centre, she initially acknowledges that "a sense of calm had overtaken her," wondering if the "welcome from her friends, real friends who accepted her" instigates such bliss (44). However, while the presence of her friends arouses sensations of tranquillity within these new spaces, their absence engenders unease. When her guide returns to his Mama, Maria immediately feels "afraid," a morning that was "beautiful... sunny" becomes "oppressive," and the Angolan heat grows "more fierce all the time" (45-47). Vieira associates discomforting feelings with Maria's solitude, thereby reinforcing the security and comfort of collective identification. "When she was alone," he writes, "Maria felt less sure of herself" (45), explicitly tying her self-esteem to the presence of other characters.

Although, at times, Maldoror explores what she defines as "the aloneness of a woman" in *Sambizanga* (47), the director uses these moments of isolation to exhibit Maria's resilience and self-assurance. When Maria holds a young guide's hand, Andrade's body language suggests that Maria confidently leads the boy through the dusty roads. Eyes surveying the city with purpose, brow furrowed in concentration, the actress's subtle facial expressions convey determination to locate Domingos as her character traverses an unfamiliar setting. When Maria and her guide reach Mutamba Square, Maria comments disparagingly on the changing landscape and rapid city development; however, rather than feeling uneasy within this new space and retreating into herself, Maria reacts with exasperated disbelief: "This is not Mutamba. Maybe you call it like that but Mutamba is not here" (00:58:13-20). By marking a difference between her unsullied memory of the area and the renovated, gentrified

landscape, Maria rebukes the governmental forces who stole her husband, subjugated her people, disfigured Luanda. Despite the looming presence of Portuguese officialdom fostered by the imposing, impersonal architecture, Maria asserts control over this unfamiliar space and, in continuing to quest for her husband, her unfamiliar situation.

Vieira's Maria is similarly perplexed by Mutamba Square's modernised landscape because the geographical space differs from her memory of "those times, when, with her friends from Ingombota, she went down as far as Coquieros" (51). Vieira's Maria uses escapades with her peers as memory markers, emphasising the depth of her dependence on social relationships in order to promulgate her underlying support for the local community and, therefore, Vieira's unabashed support for the MPLA. However, Maria's lack of assertiveness when recalling this memory – "Where is the garden with the monument without anyone on it? And the tall fig trees?" – engender subtle sensations of discomfort when she acts autonomously, thereby surreptitiously tying feelings of insecurity and doubt to Maria's moments of self-reliance. In Maldoror's film, a guard complains about the weather and casually attempts to engage Maria in conversation, yet the protagonist does not respond (00:54:33-40). Unperturbed by the weather, determined to find her husband, she remains focused and refuses to lower herself to small talk with a treacherous *cipaio*. While Vieira's Maria finds the temperature "oppressive" and "fierce" (47), eventually finding herself "defeated by the heat weighing down all the city" (49), Maldoror's 'rebellious rewriting' of Maria's character as a resilient and autonomous figure is exemplified by disinterest in the weather, palpable disdain for the *cipaio*, determination to locate her imprisoned husband despite the administration's obstacles.

While *Sambizanga* adopts the slowness and precision of neorealist filmmaking during calm, unflustered scenarios, Maldoror uses long takes and slow editing techniques in an

unconventional manner during lively ‘Hollywood-esque’ sequences of action. In Luanda, when Maria fruitlessly visits yet another administrative building, gradually coming to realise her husband’s unfortunate fate, she staggers through the jail before exiting into the heaving streets. For a split-second, the doorway is jet-black, creating the visual analogy that Maria returns to reality from a realm of complete darkness, and she falls to the floor, defeated. Maria’s breakdown is shot carefully in a smooth, fluid motion: some local citizens rush to assist Maria whereas the majority ignore her reaction entirely (01:25:31-27:02). The encoded connotations of the raw, hazy neorealist film footage, which, in turn, are accentuated by Maldoror’s smooth neorealist editing style, subtly suggest that harsh concoctions of misery and suffering are also, on rare occasions, commingled with authentic acts of kindness from others, rudimentary senses of compassion inspiring unrelated locals to interact on a daily basis despite their differences and asymmetries. Moments of trauma and tragedy are thus familiar or ‘real’ for savvy, streetwise locals, members of the public who are at once semi-attentive to Maria’s fall yet principally unsurprised by her dramatic daylight outburst, startled by the unknown lady’s breakdown but not sincerely moved to outrage by details of her predicament, the intricacies of her plight.

Connecting frenetic editing techniques to the film’s ambiguous content, Maldoror’s editing style echoes Godard’s tendency to compose his films unconventionally, subverting popular filmmaking trends in order to articulate the complexities of a new reality which might transcend the configurations and systemisations that centre around men. In *À bout de souffle* [translation: *Breathless*] (1960), Michel slowly drives through the street, muttering about Patricia in a sensual yet perturbed manner: “I have a girl who has a nice neck, nice breasts, a nice voice... Nice wrists... A nice forehead... Nice knees... But she's such a coward!” (00:25:40-44). Michel’s attraction to Patricia is here complicated by the pair’s paradoxical

characteristics. Both are nihilists of a different breed: while Michel's 'active nihilism' manifests as a lust for adventurism, spontaneity and thrills, Patricia's 'passive nihilism' is lethargic, cynical and unimaginative, leaving her unable to generate meaning in a universe rife with insignificance and meaningless voids (Dreyfus 2012). The frenetic energy engendered by the film's syncopated editing style emphasizes the volatility of positioning two very different humans in close proximity, as well as the tensions engendered by Michel's blind sensual passion contradicting his tendency to rationalize romantic, spontaneous liaisons in a cold, robotic manner.

A large proportion of the locals shot in *Sambizanga* are unconscious of Maria's predicament within the context of the project's fictional narrative, echoing de Sica's use of local citizens as non-professional actors. Indeed, the inclusion of the citizens' everyday activities operates as a series of astute social observations, imbuing *Sambizanga*'s storyline with subtle undercurrents of anti-collectivism through depictions of mass disinterest. From wives carrying furniture and washing clothes to children scavenging for food and playing with marbles, a plethora of localised concerns far more personal and pressing for the civilians than Maria's quest for Domingos capture the 'in-between moments' which are absent from Vieira's novella, emphasising Maria's estrangement from the broader Angolan community in *Sambizanga* by distinguishing her from Vieira's "imagined collectivity" (Peres 1997: 32). Although the individualised personalities of the locals are not developed to the same level as the narrative's main characters, the collective indifference of the local population plays a pivotal role in transforming the militant tone of *The Real Life of Xavier Domingos* into *Sambizanga*'s exploration of a woman's hardship. Challenging the novella's notion that the Angolan communities exist in harmony, the indifference of those passing Maria's breakdown

unmoved and uninterested undermines the vision of Angola's citizens united by a collectivised political struggle against the Portuguese regime.

While Godard uses syncopation to charge calm scenes with insatiable energy, Maldoror uses long takes to imbue energetic scenarios with a pervading sense of calculation and inevitability, reversing the misogynistic universe of *Breathless* as means of 'rebelliously rewriting' the patriarchal structures which frame women's representations on film. During the final dance scene, the township's lively, energetic dancing is captured for extended periods with steadiness and slowness (01:38:25-39:02). Reminiscent of Vittorio de Sica's precise attention to detail in *Sciusecià* [translation: *Shoeshine*] (1946) and *Ladri di biciclette* [translation: *Bicycle Thieves*] (1948), Maldoror's calculated camera shots counteract the fast-paced dancing's energy, thereby implying that jubilant acts of such dynamic rituals are as commonplace for the citizens as strolling through the town centre or washing clothes in the river. While the raucous dance communicates in certain ways the township's courage in the face of institutionalised injustices, the ceremony's unsubdued vitality may also symbolise the manner in which injustice is normalised for the local community, the dance's jubilation and vivacity signifying a genuine lack of interest in the tragic conclusion of Maria's quest. The scene's ambiguity is exacerbated by the unconventional editing's destabilisation of authorial intention: rather than *representing* cinematic actions, the scene's contents are *presented* by Maldoror, at once echoing the filmic universe's cold impartiality while also emphasising Maldoror's resolute focus on Maria's heart-wrenching tale, controlled treatment of specific subject matter in the wake of neglect from the local population, disinterest throughout the novella's palpable support for the MPLA.

When Domingos is abducted from his home, Maldoror's editing is initially syncopated, accentuating the shock of the intrusion (00:13:30-14:46). However, despite Domingos's relentless writhing and resistance, the transition between these shots gradually slows to a regulated rhythm, mimicking the policemen's unencumbered efficiency while, simultaneously, adding a sense of futility to Maria's unsuccessful remonstrations and the ineffective, humiliating flailing of her husband's limbs. Using a free-wheeling mixture of diverse editing techniques to create a cold and chaotic representation of Maria's environment that oscillates between unfriendliness and disinterest to warmth, kindness and jubilation, Maldoror demonstrates a Godard-esque disregard "for the conventional constraints founded on continuity editing" (Marie 2003: 92). By communicating sophisticated ideas and complex themes which are often contradictory or paradoxical, Maldoror generates a filmic representation of Angola which mimics the harshness, chaos and inconsistencies of the spacio-temporal world beyond the screen. However, while Godard's aesthetics of chaos mimic the carefree attitudes towards sexuality in *Breathless*, Maldoror challenges conventionalised filmmaking techniques as means of 'rebelliously rewriting' women's representations shaped by conventionalised cinematic (his)stories.

The matter-of-fact presentation of the policemen's robotic efficiency, juxtaposed against Domingos's frenzied struggle and Maria's heart-wrenching screams, echoes the malignant objectivity of *Sambizanga*'s universe. Established by both *Sambizanga*'s neorealist and Godard's new wave strategies, the filmic universe's cold objectivity negates the pervasive sentimentality of Vieira's novella, wherein brief words of resistance "echo" and "sound" (25) in Maria's heart, and life's hardships "had given her a way of seeing without ever giving up" (49). In *Sambizanga*, although Maria "[sees] without giving up" when she begins her quest for Domingos, eventually his death breaks her heart and, ultimately, brings her to her knees.

Shockingly, Maria's second public outburst in *Sambizanga* is a genuine loss of control as a result of a terrifying loss, a violent breakdown elicited by the realisation that her husband has been killed rather than a composed ploy to obtain vital information from cold-hearted officials. At 01:23:08, as the scene shifts from Domingos's cell to Luanda's winding streets, a lone, non-diegetic female singer replaces the low-pitched male choir, signifying the shift of the camera's gaze from the deceased Domingos to a heartbroken Maria amid a city of disinterested inhabitants. Despite Domingos's death, the street-level echelons of Luanda's society continue daily routines – playing games, transporting washing, collecting food – when Maria stumbles into the open, howling in distraught.

Figure 4: A poster featuring Domingos Xavier

Maria's abrupt wailing eviscerates the previous scene's hypnotic musicality, reinforcing the underlying disunity between Maria and her external environment by undermining the harmonised sonic transition from the male choir to the lone voice. Disrupting the town's civility with an animalistic outburst, the synergy that Vieira's novella constructs between Domingos, Maria and the general populace is violently ruptured in the film, emphasising the fragmented, chaotic nature of Maria's personal narrative in order to eviscerate the consonance of individuals' stories woven by Vieira's grand narrative of politicised social unity. In Vieira's novella, those who comfort Maria are genial and optimistic: their "friendly voices" (74) insist "Port Alexander is far away but better than prison" and "with luck she could even manage to go there, to see her husband" (75). Conversely, in *Sambizanga*, Young Zito, Grandpa Petelo and a group of local women comfort Maria as many other citizens watch from afar, leaning against trees and playing cards, registering her breakdown yet unmoved by her screams. The response of Maria's companions is minimal, restricted to

simple instructions amid floods of tears, empty suggestions nonetheless full of love and care as, conversely, disinterested onlookers pass the incident unperturbed by the outburst and its context: “Don’t cry...” sobs the tiny group of consolers in the shadow of a cold, unmoving cityscape as Maria weeps for her husband’s demise, “...Look after your baby...” (01:27:38-28:10).

When Domingos passes away, the forlorn mutterings of Maria and her companions slowly transform into a sombre, elegiac chorus, reminiscent of the solemn, spontaneous singing of the inhabitants of Domingos’s cell, thereby aligning the prisoners’ spirituality with the free women of Luanda. In the shot’s background, a group of men sit at a table, disrespecting Domingos’s memory by playing cards as the women grieve. The shot’s composition – men sat at a table, in the top left-hand corner of the frame; women positioned grieving on the floor, towards the bottom right – places the card game in a higher position than Maria’s agony, using a visual metaphor to undermine her sorrow. The camera zooms into the men’s unemotional countenances as the sound shifts from sobbing to the sorrowful, beautiful melody, implying that graceful music cannot stir responses from the players. Unmoved by the emotional distress and mellifluous singing occurring metres away, the men’s apathy weaves a subtle exposé of patriarchal ignorance into *Sambizanga*’s invalidation of a “collective [Angolan] identity” (Phyllis 1997: 31), a unification between citizens which Vieira carefully endeavours to construct throughout *The Real Life of Domingos Xavier*. It is uncertain whether these men are wearied and overwhelmed by the township’s misery or simply do not care, yet their desensitisation contrasts starkly with the passion and sensitivity of Maria and her friends. Disrespected by their male counterparts, devastated by Domingos’s death, Maria’s companions refuse to capitulate; like the prisoners in the cell, the group create music from

Domingos's passing as an act of defiance, creating hauntingly beautiful melodies during bleak, horrifying circumstances.

The silent group of imprisoned reprobates described in *The Real Life of Domingos Xavier* as "drunks... petty thieves... rowdies" (67) become choristers in *Sambizanga*, elegising Domingos's death and singing into the night in a composed, respectful manner. The poetry of Vieira's line: "And not all the whips of all the *cipaios* sent into the prison could silence the prisoners before daybreak" (69) is thus reimagined by Maldoror as a series of long, ghostly takes, slowly passing over the singers and their forlorn countenances before finally resting on Domingos's unmoving, insentient head as a prisoner cleans his wound. A visual reinterpretation of the metaphorical "wait until daybreak" in Vieira's writing, the take's prolonged length, combined with unsteady, amateurish camera usage, echo another element of neorealism's influence on *Sambizanga*: rejection of Hollywood's obsession with perfectionism. As previously discussed, Maldoror worked on *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) as the director's assistant, and the photography of Gillo Pontecorvo's neorealist motion-picture shares with *Sambizanga* a worn, grainy texture reminiscent of early documentary's visual haziness. While Maldoror's \$70,000 budget may have limited the director to low quality filmstock, rough film footage within certain neorealist films represents a conscious rejection of Hollywood's "sheer technical polish" (Ruberto 2007: 7) in favour of a cinema whose meaning is derived from a storyline's sincerity rather than glossy, contrived form. The thematic grittiness of *Sambizanga*'s content is mirrored by the visual grittiness of its cinematography, engendering a sophisticated congruity between the film's visible form and its dramatic, uncompromising storyline, which, in turn, emphasises the harsh indifference of Maria's environment, a collection of dilapidated, poverty-stricken spaces occupied by locals

who are more concerned with their own personal struggles for survival and prosperity than a “composite vision of the collective struggle” (Peres 1997: 31).

Pontecorvo’s treatment of depoliticised civilians in the context of sweeping political movements also nuances Maldoror’s film. The main characters in *The Battle of Algiers* have clear allegiances – Ali La Pointe and Jafaar are violent members of the FLN (National Liberation Front), Colonel Philippe Mathieu and his militaristic peers are sent into Algiers to “organise the fight against rebel activity” – yet Pontecorvo highlights how innocent victims are caught in the violence’s maelstrom, for France and Algeria are both guilty of utilising street-bombs and other acts of terrorism which kill and injure innocent pedestrians, exploring the all-devouring nature of political upheaval by lambasting the demise of morality which tarnishes the two warring nations. Curiously, one critic attacks Pontecorvo’s sympathy for the civilian casualties, arguing that the film’s “moral ambivalence is only a romantic humanist’s sugaring of the pill for the liberal audience unwilling to stomach the hard facts of revolution” (Wilson, cited by Bondanella 2001: 173).

Echoing Pontecorvo’s compassion for civil war’s apolitical casualties, Maria’s position in relation to the MPLA emphasises how the violence between liberation groups and their colonial repressors spills over and ensnares innocent civilians. Maria’s idolisation of her husband in *The Real Life of Domingos Xavier* thus “sugars the pill” for revolutionaries by venerating Domingos’s actions, exhorting his martyrdom in order to stress how colonialism’s brutality justifies revolutionary action. *Sambizanga* does not shy away from the fact that revolutionary action did take place: at the film’s denouement, Miguel and the secret members of the MPLA convene on the coastal rocks, a moment reminiscent of Domingos’s lunchtime conversation in the opening scenes of *Sambizanga*. The men agree to “free [their] comrades”

on the Fourth of February, the historic date in reality when the MPLA attacked Luanda's prison at the onset of the Angolan War of Independence (01:40:15). However, by visually alluding to Domingos's conversation in the opening scene, we are encouraged to remember his earlier words: "Listen, I know the Whites, and that White [foreman] is our friend. Remember that, okay?" (00:04:39-44). Although Domingos is entrapped by Angola's political maelstrom, his sentiments are never malicious, mindless violence never his motive. Alongside the film's sustained exploration of Maria's hardship, Maldoror's emphasis on Domingos's innocence and passivity thus exemplifies a certain tendency of African directors "to exorcise and explain violence" through the medium of filmic adaptation without resorting to violence (Dovey 2009: 277). Maldoror 'rebelliously rewrites' portrayals of African masculinity, as well as femininity, in the context of revolution, highlighting the character's bravery without depicting Domingos as a violent man which, in turn, illustrates the unjust barbarity of the colonial project.

Vieira's vision of unity in *The Real Life of Xavier Domingos* is particularly dependant on the interconnectedness of plural perspectives, the writer's ability to weave disparate voices together in a neat, harmonious manner. Although the novella's title implies a singular narrative, *The Real Life of Xavier Domingos* combines numerous perspectives within a non-linear framework of ruptured temporality. The distinguishable narratives of Maria, Zefa and Sousinha, as well as Mussunda, Chico John, Miguel, Young Zito and Grandpa Petelo, only converge in the final chapter. Mussunda's final speech is followed by a silence so sombre that "not even the wind dared to rustle the leaves of the fig trees" (84), thus nature itself unites the characters in solemn memory of fallen Domingos. However, the novella's pseudo-natural silence also denotes a lack of invitation to challenge the significance of Domingos's passing: silent awe is the immediate response to the labourer's fate, demanding

unquestionable respect for Domingos, his comrades and their cause. To challenge this noiseless moment equates to disrespecting Domingos and the collective identity of the MPLA, thus both emotional and intellectual silence are weighted as favourable reactions to the horrifying event.

Maldoror, on the other hand, uses ambivalence to charge Domingos's ceremony at the film's denouement with undercurrents of solemnity. Mussunda leaps from the stage after giving his speech and immediately starts dancing, joining the playful movements of the crowd. The camera slowly zooms out, gradually revealing a dancehall full of couples stepping and swaying to upbeat, swinging music, and one cannot determine whether the revellers are determined to be happy, dancing in defiance of the repressive Portuguese Administration, or if Domingos's memory drifts into nothingness as the world continues rotating, Maria's plight forgotten by locals as they carry on their normal lives.

One couple are noticeably absent from the evening's merriment, thus *Sambizanga's* final scene, in an ambivalent manner, explores the (in)significance of Maria and Domingos's relationship within the context of a colonised country's struggle for freedom. *The Real Life of Domingos Xavier*, dissimilarly, emphasises unquestionable heroism on Domingos's part, assuming an almost utopic unity between the novella's characters as a result of his heroism. Maldoror's reclamation of Maria's individuality is exemplified by her decision to modify Mussunda's heartfelt speech, creating an appraisal of Domingos Xavier and, crucially, "his companion Maria" (01:38:10). By emphasising that love, rather than political motivation, connects these separate individuals, Maria's individuality is given the same significance as that of Domingos, thereby destabilising the emphasis on Domingos's martyrdom which, in Vieira's novella, characterises the dissident's significance for most of the local community

and indeed Maria. Vieira's novella is blatantly politicised in favour of the MPLA, whereas *Sambizanga* 'rebelliously rewrites' the novella in order to treat Maria as end in herself, inculcating the main character's inherent worth despite her minor role within the larger contexts of revolutionary action. The director, by her own admission, is "only interested in women who struggle" (46); women, like *Sambizanga*'s Maria, who are caught up in a politicised situation but do not adopt a militant stance; women, like the literary Maria, whose sufferings are misrepresented, marginalised, forgotten.

Alice Breitmeyer argues that *Sambizanga* "was shaped, by both Maldoror and the MPLA, as a piece of propaganda, in order to gain international recognition for the injustice of the Portuguese rule in Angola and credibility for the MPLA in the international community" (Breitmeyer, published online by Buala Organisation: 2014). However, Maldoror's tone rarely delves into the propagandistic levels of *The Real Life of Domingos Xavier*. Both *Sambizanga* and *The Real Life of Domingos Xavier* explore Domingos's arrest, the reaction of the labourer's family and friends, his wife's fruitless search through different Angolan environments, and Domingos's untimely death during interrogation. Contrastingly, where Vieira's novella commingles a series of different perspectives and disparate stories into a communal painting of political resistance, Maldoror shifts the focus of her film to Maria and the quest for her lover, expanding the novella's details of Maria's story while pushing the narratives of other characters to the film's margins.

Figure 5: Sarah Maldoror in Berlin

Rather than promulgating the MPLA's stance as an outright piece of political propaganda, *Sambizanga* explores the subtleties of a woman's experience within a repressive colonial regime. As the MPLA's broader political movement in *The Real Life of Domingos Xavier*

threatens to overlook or subsume the localised struggles of marginalised women, the director's depiction of Maria traversing pre-independent Angola in search for her husband shifts the emphasis of Vieira's writing, exploring the tribulations of a character who does not act as a militant activist yet, nonetheless, becomes involuntarily embroiled in Angola's political maelstrom, consumed by the violence ravishing her nation and her husband. Maldoror's *Sambizanga* 'rebelliously rewrites' *The Real Life of Domingos Xavier*'s representations of Maria, illustrating that recognition of the roles of women during revolutionary periods plays an integral part in processing and negotiating patriarchal (his)stories. Maldoror's pioneering approach to *Sambizanga* thus offers vital possibilities for transforming African literature into film, decolonialising our worlds both on screen and beyond the cinema.

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