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# Repented and Flora and Dambudzo



Flora and Dambudzo final

Agnieszka Piotrowska

09:51

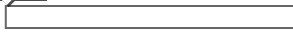




## Repented (46.41) Final

Agnieszka Piotrowska

46:41



**Author:** Agnieszka Piotrowska

**Format:** Experimental Films

**Duration:** 9' 51" & 46' 41"

**Published:** April 2021

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## Research Statement

### Preface

*This submission consists of two of my films (Flora and Dambudzo (2015) and Repented (2019) which share the core compelling question about the influence of colonialism on intimate relationships in Zimbabwe. They have very little in common apart from this exploration and reflection on love in the times of colonialism and post-colonialism. There is a period of time between the two works, the time of learning and questioning my own preconceptions and ideas. Repented (2019) is a work which is more experimental in style and more collaborative on many levels as it involves an adaptation of a play but also elements of documentary material.*

*Although I have mentioned this research previously, the juxtaposition of the two pieces and the deep exploration of the research journey between them takes place here in Screenworks for the first time and contributes something new altogether. The first reviewer has responded overwhelmingly well to the work. On the other hand, one might not understand the comments of the second reviewer as s/he only responded to one of the films, which a year ago was presented with a very much shorter and different*

*statement. Due to this critical review my submission was then re-thought and rewritten thoroughly. I am therefore grateful for the harsh words as the impetus it gave me for further thinking and further writing. I am grateful to the editors Charlotte Crofts and Alex Nevill to have stayed with me with the process.*

*The publication as stands is a tribute to the writer of the original play Finding Temeraire, (2017) Stanley Makuwe, the film editor, Anna Dobrowodzka, and also the late Professor Thomas Elsaesser who contributed immensely to the final shape of the film, giving early critiques and then introducing its various iterations at many international events and conferences, mentioning the work also in some of his writings: and thus giving me the confidence to carry on with finessing and editing the film. This quote comes from one of his speeches: 'Generally, the historical footage is brilliantly used, and quite amazing. It adds another perspective altogether. At first glance it seems to illustrate what Primrose is saying but it not only documents the colonial regime and its callous indifference to their black servants: it introduces another perspective, since these pictures were taken to celebrate colonial life, but now these images are eloquent witnesses for the prosecution, the colonial regime self-condemns itself in the footage. Congratulations! (Elsaesser in Piotrowska 2020: 198)*

*This publication is dedicated to Thomas Elsaesser's memory and to my Zimbabwean artist friends. In particular to Joe Njagu and Charmaine Mujeri, whose talent and courage are incomparable. I never stop learning from you.*

## **Research Questions**

In the autumn of 2015 in Zimbabwe I screened a draft version of a short film I made in a collaboration with Zimbabwean artists at the Zimbabwe International Film Festival. The film was called *Flora and Damudzo* and depicted a scene between the iconic Zimbabwean writer Dambudzo Marechera and his German lover, Flora Veit Wild. The work was praised but also considered highly controversial because of the emotional exchanges between the two characters. The script was almost entirely written using the words from the actual writing of the two historical figures. As their relationship was complex and often tumultuous the affair, my short, demonstrated how challenges posed by the painful historical legacy also extend to people's personal relationships.

At the time the award winning Zimbabwean playwright Stanley Makuwe saw the film and found it disturbing on many counts. We discussed the colonial legacy and, from a dramatic point of view, the power of a simple exchange between two people. Makuwe said that he too was interested in exploring the legacy of colonialism in romantic relationships, not just in interracial encounters but also between black Africans. A few years later Makuwe made contact again and invited me to direct his new play, *Finding Temeraire* (2017). The play focuses on the confrontational meeting of two characters after a long absence: Primrose, a deeply troubled but powerful woman, and Temeraire, her ex-lover who betrayed her in the past. The play premiered at the Harare International Festival of the Arts in May 2017. I then adapted the play for screen to become an experimental film entitled *Repented* (2019).

For me the research questions during this sustained enquiry were multifold, and centred around the adaption of different material for the screen, the collaborative writing process on one hand and also the 'theatricality' that is linked to it. The issue of a romance against the backdrop of colonial legacy and how one deals with it both in theatre and in film was therefore at the heart of this endeavour. I feel that the mainstream representation of these issues is often too simplistic, either showing the master/slave encounter such as in *12 Years a Slave (2013)* or instead employing a sentimental and fairy tale narratives such as in *A United Kingdom (2016)*.

## **Context**

In terms of the research and the creative journey between these two pieces of work, *Flora and Dambudzo* and *Repented*, the core issue is agency. In the construction of the characters, in *Flora and Dambudzo* it is clearly Dambudzo Marechera who has most agency in the scene, although in the bigger picture it is Flora who is more powerful because of her position in society, based on her ethnicity and her class. In *Finding Temeraire* and then *Repented*, Makuwe explores the feminine power through writing a voice of a black maid; somebody who in the original colonial context had no power or voice whatsoever. In his writing, Makuwe restores Primrose's voice which then delivers a kind of redemption to the two characters as well as the harsh judgement on the colonial and postcolonial system.

Against the background of Mashava, an actual mining town, Makuwe's two hander depicts colonial relationships in which there is a place for a black man like Temeraire. Through his plumbing skills and personal charisma, he earns a place at the master's table. In this system, Primrose is the lowest of the low: she is a maid with no power, except her sexual power as a young attractive woman. This leads her to moments of ecstasy with her lover Temeraire but it is also her tragic downfall. In a harrowing monologue, Primrose confesses that she is the mother of his son, a mother who, faced with his coldness and the indifference of the world, had a psychotic breakdown and murdered her baby soon after his birth.

It is my understanding that Makuwe's grandmother lived in Mashava and that this story of Primrose is very loosely based on the tales Makuwe heard as a child. I am very interested in this process of translation, the translation of experience to a mediated form of writing, and then a theatrical performance and finally a film. In terms of literal translation, it is also possible that the writer wanted to put a distance between his own memory and the work he was creating as the play was written in English, and not Shona.

## **Methods**

As the co-writer/director of *Flora and Dambudzo* I had significant creative freedom, although on the other hand I also had to confront specific historical facts about the two characters and the setting. For *Repented*, however the film was based on a play written by a living writer so I had to find a creative language which in some way would correspond to his theatrical experience and intentions in the writing.

The methods and processes of adaptation (in its manifold meanings) are therefore at the centre of this project and I was keen to investigate further the work's theatricality. There have been very many works on cinema and adaptation (for example: Andrew 1984; Cohen 1979; Corrigan 1999; Stam 2004). In his classic work on adaptation, Robert Stam defines adaptation as 'less a resuscitation of an originary word than a turn in an ongoing dialogical process. Intertextual dialogism, then, helps us transcend the aporias of "fidelity"' (Stam 2004: 24). Later in the volume, in his discussion of *Robinson Crusoe*, Stam quotes the author Salman Rushdie, who celebrates 'hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, ideas, politics, movies, songs' (Rushdie, in Stam 2004: 362), and concludes, 'artistic innovation [...] occurs on the transnational borders of cultures and communities and discourses', and 'it is only in the eyes of another medium [...] that a medium reveals itself fully and profoundly' (Stam 2004: 364-65.)

In terms of theatricality, I looked at Michael Fried's seminal work *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (1980) which sides with Diderot in his suspicion of theatricality in art. Fried is primarily interested in the relationship between the work and what he refers to as 'the beholder' (ibid.: 4), a relationship which can engender the beholder's *absorption* and *concentration* in the subject matter of the painting. Theatricality in Fried's perspective means creating a theatrical moment that draws attention to the work itself and its author rather than the subject matter of the work. Following this, theatricality therefore denotes a superficial relationship to the work, and to the experience thereof on the part of the exhibitor, curator, spectator but also perhaps on the part of the artist himself. The works that 'play' to the audience and display their mechanics, Fried claimed, are by definition false, inauthentic, and therefore might not last. Instead, he advocated the notion of a quieter moment of full 'absorption' in which the artist's work is not on easy display, is not obvious but rather quiet and subtle, enabling the viewer's engagement with the work, and with themselves, in a reflective and contemplative way – the viewer is 'absorbed'.

In theatre studies more broadly 'theatricality' has been discussed by scholars with different approaches to the word and what it denotes. It is clear that for the theatre to exist at all it has to be 'theatrical' in some way– the very quality which Fried despaired over. Semioticians discuss whether any production in the theatre is in fact *a translation*, illustration, fulfilment or supplement of the dramatic text (Davis & Postlewait 2003). Theatricality therefore could be understood as a process that makes a text (in the theatre) become 'more'. Roland Barthes (1972) famously claimed that 'theatricality is theatre minus text' (ibid.: 26) referring to the system of the signs on the stage which make some productions more theatrical than others; it makes them larger than life. However, he also insisted (which is less commonly evoked) that that the 'theatrical' quality can begin at the level of the writing. In the same essay in his discussion of Baudelaire he outlines the notion of 'artificiality' (ibid.:29) as opposed to theatricality. It is the former notion, artificiality, which in fact has more in common with Fried's use of the term 'theatricality'.

In my film creative work, I use theatricality as it is described here to dislodge the viewer's – reader's – set of preconceived notions. I aim to create a distancing effect, rather than 'absorption'. In my earlier film *Married to the Eiffel Tower* (2009), for example, the image of a woman physically close to objects creates – or begins to create – a space in which to challenge the heteronormative standards of behaviour. Here, in both *Flora and Dambudzo* and *Repented*, I employed a number of methods to evoke this kind of theatricality in order to challenge the viewer. As *Repented* is a longer piece, the challenge was more significant in this regard. At the beginning of the film the key female character changes her clothes for a more flamboyant outfit as a way of embodying theatricality. This gesture empowers her to proceed to face the man who betrayed her in the past. As she arrives in the ghetto, she presents a curious figure with a red theatrical dress and green high heel shoes. All of this is designed to signal a disruption of a normal routine that will engender a transformation.

When directing the theatre production of *Finding Temeraire*, amongst other things, I lowered the ages of the main characters. The actors Charmaine Mujeri and Eddi Sandifolo are my trusted collaborators and I had confidence they could pull off these challenging roles. Based on the narrative, I also thought it was possible to imagine the characters from 20 or 25 years ago as young rather than in their middle age and in fact questioned the initial indication of their age as written by Makuwe. My vision was that Primrose could have been a very young woman and naïve in her infatuation with Temeraire.

For the film adaptation, I decided to deploy an additional level of intertextuality through the use of black and white archive footage which is not necessarily directly linked to the narrative but rather linked thematically and conceptually to the emotions of the character Primrose. In hindsight, this seems a very simple idea and almost obvious but it was neither of these when I first presented it as a plan to the film's editor Anna Dobrowodzka. We experimented with introducing split screens to the film, which again made it even more distanced and theatrical. This allowed us to offer different perspectives onto the narrative but also to translate the historicity of it onto the screen alongside the live action drama between the two main characters. All of the footage used was shot during the colonial times in Rhodesia and in South Africa by those who were either supporting the oppressive regime or directly hired by representatives of it to obtain relevant footage and hence all of it was shot by men. We reclaimed this footage in order to give Primrose more power.

Another element of this particular theatricality is therefore the ethics and fidelity regarding using this archive material as 'found footage'. In his essay on 'The Ethics of Appropriation' (2014) Thomas Elsaesser reminds us: 'the origins of found footage films, as opposed to compilation films, are usually located within the Marcel Duchamp tradition of Dada and conceptual art, of Surrealism and the *objet trouvé*, the found object. The point of such a stranded object, left behind by the tide of time, is that it is made beautiful and special by the combination of a recent loss of practical use and its perishable or fragile materiality' (ibid.: 32). The situation here is both different and similar: different because the archive material and split screens have a direct role to play in the film, which is not related to beauty but rather to truth and knowledge – and by extension the writing and the description of what life may have been like in the past. This is only a part of the story

however,; as characters in the play *Finding Temeraire* remember *the place* of Mashava as a good place. This is partly because they were young at the time but there is also a certain ambivalent and ambiguous nostalgia which they both seem to evoke and which Makuwe has captured in the play. This nostalgia might be for the rigid, predictable and fixed life, as opposed to independence which brought cockroaches with it – a most bizarre image in Makuwe’s play that resonates uncomfortably with colonial insults towards the local population. Now, the characters stand for a dirty mess and lack of order – even as the order of the past was a denigrating and, in the end, a hated order. In our appropriating of the archive footage then, we also wanted to convey what the characters are missing– as it was not just the profound injustice and oppressiveness of the place, it was also parties and dances and fun, almost as a gesture of defiance but also, painfully, a re-enactment of systematic inequality.

The split screens and the archive material clearly spoil a spectator’s absorption in the film, but they also add to the sense of theatricality and, along with that potentially to the film’s authenticity and originality.

### **Outcomes**

A significant outcome of making *Repented* is a deeper political understanding of the process of translation as well as an exploration of a collaborative process between creative people in different cultures. *Flora and Dambudzo* on the other hand is an example of an adaptation of a different kind, using the authentic writings and re-grouping these to create a fictionalized but true account. In the play *Finding Temeraire*, a male writer wrote a voice for a young uneducated woman and then asked a European woman director to translate it for the stage and screen. I was anxious but also seduced by the beauty and strength of Makuwe’s work, so put my initial doubts aside. Makuwe, my long-term editing collaborator Anna Dobrowodzka and myself worked hard to subvert and circumvent the inter-gender and intralingual issue of the female voice written by a man. The resulting film *Repented* celebrates hybridity and intermingling through a number of interpretive tools but mostly through the use of black and white archive footage which as I’ve outlined is linked thematically and conceptually to the narrative but not directly connected to the physical place of Mashava.

As I’ve suggested, *Repented* experiments with split screens using traditions of visual intertextuality (Grant 2013, 2018), both in order to offer different perspectives onto the narrative but also to translate the historicity of it onto the screen alongside the live action of the drama between the two main characters. The notion of memory, including screen memory (ibid.), is a core issue of the work. The connections of the archive material to the unfolding drama are both literal and illustrative but also more obscure. We felt that the introduction of split screens and the archive material, related to systemic pain more than any literal or faithful use of the actual footage could do. The ‘object’ that has been left behind has been lost forever, and only traces of it can be sensed – through creative evocations of the pain that infuses events with the most intimate of relationships during that time.



## Impact

Both *Flora and Dambudzo*, and *Repented* have screened internationally, including special events and conferences in in the UK, the USA, the Netherlands, France and Poland. During some screenings of *Repented*, spectators expressed their changed view of the colonial times. Notably, *Flora and Dambudzo* also screened several times in Zimbabwe and engendered serious discussions about history and race, as well as the place of arts in these conversations. I hope that the publication of the work in *Screenworks* will open further discussions.

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## Peer Reviews

All reviews refer to original research statements which have been edited in response to what follows:

### **Review 1: Accept for publication with no amendments.**

This is a compelling practice-research exposition which illustrates the author's deep exploration of colonial legacy and the ways this has impacted romantic relationships across several creative projects. The statement and research questions revolve around three separate but integrated projects; two films entitled *Flora and Damudzo* and *Repented* as well as a theatre production entitled *Finding Temeraire*. Across these projects the author acts as a director, writer and collaborator to explore the multifaceted ways that creative stories can be translated into different forms of media, languages and through different modes of presentation.

The central thread running through these projects is an investigation of colonial systems on romantic relationships and the author explores the ways these are made tangible for an audience through a theoretical framework of theatricality. Employing the writing of Michael Fried, the author suggests a common notion of theatrical moments as ones that draw attention to a work itself rather than subject matter. This is outlined in a fair amount of detail given the limited scope of this publication format and serves to locate the author's practical work, but could also be explored to a much greater extent in relation to similar ideas around self-reflexivity in cinema and literature.

The methods section is detailed and describes the author's creative process while making *Repented* as well as several experimental techniques in the film that emerged from the adaptation. This is perhaps the most exciting element of the work as it illustrates the author's challenge of capturing the core of the play, rather than directly recreating it for screen and hence reveals most about the process of adaptation. This section, and the writing in general, leans heavily toward *Repented* however which leaves questions about what specific theatrical gestures were explored in *Flora and Dambudzo* and how these films tie together as part of a larger enquiry?

The outcomes section broadly details the unique contribution of these films and suggests that *Flora and Dambudzo* creates a fictionalized but true account of its subject matter through adaptation. This claim is not entirely supported elsewhere in the writing though and could be expanded. It would be great to hear more about the process of writing this

short film based on historical letters/characters. Similarly, the author's research journey is well articulated and evidenced through the two films but the theatre production *Finding Temeraire* (2017) which is a key part of the narrative is unfortunately not featured in any detail. This is presumably due to the challenges of documentation and the ephemeral nature of the performance, but it might have been beneficial for the author to reflect on this challenge as part of their presentation of the work.

Overall however this body of creative work presents unique and insightful perspectives on post-colonial romantic relationships which extend beyond the scope of this written statement and are worthy of publication. The author's framing of these projects through the lens of theatricality is innovative and warrants further discussion and expansion beyond this written statement.

## **Review 2: Invite resubmission with major revisions.**

The film *Repented*, adapted from the play *Finding Temeraire*, takes place in postcolonial Zimbabwe, in the mining town Mashava, and is structured around an encounter, at once intimate and violent, between former lovers Primrose and Temeraire. According to the accompanying statement, the submission represents an act of "creative collaboration," a mode of artistic practice that "draws attention to the political dimension of translation and which overcomes cultural difference."

The main weakness of the work concerns the disjuncture between the director's statement and the film itself. Although the director describes translation as central to the making of the film, the film itself is not really about translation, nor does it creatively engage translation as a problem or question.

The statement suggests that the archival footage is, in part, an attempt to "translate" Primrose's experiences as she narrates them. This is the least interesting use of the footage: when Primrose mentions the mines, for example, the film cuts to footage of an industrial-mining mill. As Primrose remembers the "dancing nights" she and Temeraire once enjoyed, black and white footage of well-dressed black men and women dancing at a club appear. In these instances, the images merely visualize Primrose's words. For some viewers they might even detract from the power of her body and words. I found the use of archival footage in the piece much more compelling when it suggested a historical atmosphere, or gave expression to the weight of colonial history, which continues to press upon affective, gender, and economic relations in postcolonial Zimbabwe.

The statement says little about what seem some of the most significant issues raised by the film. Mashava was a colonial mining town, a white settler community in which many black migrant workers lived and worked, and it was the mineral asbestos that was extracted and absorbed by the bodies of black mineworkers there. The film alludes to the landscape of Zimbabwe's colonial extraction economy; characters refer directly to industrial mining during the colonial period and artisanal mining (for gold) in the present. Primrose remembers the worker killed when his boss threw him down a mine shaft, and she recounts the dust that blew in from the mines and settled on the furniture. Several

scenes of the back-and-white footage feature mineworkers, and I wonder if the “whites-only sewage pond” was an exhausted asbestos pit mine, converted into a wastewater dump. (Asbestos was extracted by strip and shaft mining.)

I would have liked the statement to say more about labor and the violence of asbestos extraction in the colonial period and of small-scale gold mining in the postcolonial, neo-liberal present. What kind of connection is the film making between the ecological and the affective? Or between gendered forms of labor and intimate relations? How does the film call attention to toxicity taken in by the earth and those human bodies deemed disposable? How might mining, or extraction, work as a metaphor for Primrose’s exhaustive effort to unearth the past so that she might narrate it for herself and Temeraire?

*All reviews refer to original research statements which have been edited in response.*

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