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Still Lives

Notes on Withering Refuge and Beyond

Pedro Figueiredo Neto

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Still Lives. Notes on Withering Refuge and Beyond

- ¹ In the authored film-article *Withering Refuge*¹ (dir. Pedro F. Neto, 2020) I look at the Meheba Refugee Camp, a settlement opened in 1971 in Zambia's Northwestern Province. I examine common depictions of (protracted) displacement and explore alternative representations of the phenomenon while interrogating the possibilities of current and prospective refuge amidst developmental and extractive endeavours. *Withering Refuge* is the reworked by-product of a pre-recorded online conference paper² about a film in the making. As pandemic restrictions turned the conference into an online only event, panel convenors requested pre-recorded presentations to avoid technical mishaps, and further encouraged contributors to creatively explore the advantages of the audio-visual format. The final cut eventually sought to accommodate the comments and remarks received. In sum, *Withering Refuge* consists of a meta-film followed by a film: a theoretically driven, "screen-located" (Köhn 2020) first part, which also addresses the processual dimensions around the making of the second part, that is, the film itself, an ethnographically grounded essay film crafted with different media collected upon fieldwork in Meheba over the years. Form-wise, can we speak of this multimodal piece as a "film-article"?
- ² *Withering Refuge* was not necessarily the culmination of a process but rather another stage in an expanding process of (re)mediation comprising of diverse products and revelations that explores the polysemic affordances of different semiotic sources The

affordances of multimodality do not only lie in its proclivity to rediscoveries, reinvention and speculation, but in its central interrogation of when and where do processes end and begin. And, by inference what, then, is the final *product* of research. Multimodality, in which different stances of the audio-visual realm take part, is simultaneously a research and analytical tool but also a positioning (Westmoreland 2022).

- 3 It is in this vein that I now evoke the notion of *still life*, as in art, and its cousin, the *still*, as in film. It is with them that I revisit *Withering Refuge* in order to expand the aesthetic and conceptual reflection around the making of film, as well as on the possible visual representations of displacement and refuge in dialogue with, and beyond, the geography framed.
- 4 A *still life*, also known as “*nature-morte*” in its Latin version (literally meaning “dead nature”), is an artform that depicts mostly inanimate and/or dead subject matter, typically flat objects which are either natural or man-made. Flowers, fruits, vegetables, rocks, hunted animals, books, vases, tables, drinking glasses, wine, cloths, musical instruments, skulls, extinguished candles. These are among the most commonplace objects that integrate the *still life* repertoire. While the genre was only defined as such in the 17th century and in the context of Northern Europe painting, *still lifes* can be found in Ancient Egypt funerary painting and Pompei frescoes, in Middle Ages and Renaissance manuscript decorations. Modern and Contemporary Art eventually contributed with their own idiosyncratic reappropriations. Today, the *still life* spans painting, photography, video, and synthetic imagery (software and/or AI developed), reinventing itself too in performance and installation. However, the *still life* has been ranked as a lower form of art, sometimes even dismissed as a mere stylistic exercise. This perception is often attributed to the lack of movement, but especially to the absence of human subjects in the compositions. The genre has been historically employed in formal experimentation; often used to understand and explore the natural world by observing and then depicting it. But above all, it has been a more or less neutral coat to express ideas, emotions, and/or histories through allegorical symbolism. Indeed, symbolic objects often stood for the portrait of the owner, and depicted elements could be read as metaphors, almost on a purely semantic basis. Notwithstanding the abstraction into which some expressions of the genre would evolve in more recent times, fact is that the diverse and mingled allegorical symbolism continued to speak of ephemerality and stillness, warning us about the inevitable decay, impermanence, and the frailty of life (Saisellin 1976; Ebert-Schifferer 1999; Langmuir 2001). I cannot fail to recall Rebecca Solnit’s words on still life photography from contemporary artist J. John Priola: “Objects seem like witnesses, silent, unjudging, obdurate witnesses to the lives that go on in front of them. Perhaps we imbue objects with associational meaning to bring their otherness back within the fold of the familiar, to make their muteness speak, to associate them with the absences we know rather than those more profound absences we do not” (Solnit and Grundberg 1998:118).
- 5 A closer look at *Withering Refuge* reveals the echoes of the genre. In it, human life is acknowledged — and portrayed — not by objective presence but by the traces and impacts of its existence. A pair of abandoned shoes, plastic bottles with brownish water, grinding balls, trees bleeding, an abandoned hoe in a derelict playground. In the form of film-stills — as Bazin (1967) contended, “film’s most irreducible form”—, these and

other images can be found below. Contrary to film, frozen images promote (re)discoveries as they bring along new interpolated meanings (cf. Deleuze 2013).

- 6 One the one hand, these stills echo and reinterpret *still life*'s tropes in the realm of the visual culture of forced displacement, as they explore and contest a metaphorical subtext of immobility, entrapment, decline. On the other hand, the lens of the *still life* seeks to heckle descriptive — and prescriptive — representations of the phenomenon in light of the existing literature. Images This is an invitation addressed at the viewers-readers; an invitation to revisit the way in which we see, depict, write and think about, refugeeness.

Still 1 – Fabric



Piece of Tanzania-made fabric hanging on a tree.
Still from the film *Withering Refuge*, Pedro F. Neto 2020

Still 2 - Shoes



A pair of damaged shoes, each facing a different direction.
Still from the film *Withering Refuge*, Pedro F. Neto 2020

- 7 Every day, images of displacement and dispossession circulate in social networks and media outlets. Humanitarian crises are showcased in museums and art galleries. No wonder the widespread visual sense of what ‘refugees’ and refugee camps look like (Malkki 1995:10). Images produce categories. The “aesthetics of migration” produce the “migrant image” – and vice-versa (Demos 2013; Kruse 2018). Images construct our perception of the world perhaps more strongly than existing politico-legal frameworks (Rancière 2004; Köhn 2016). However, reporting practices, the production and editing of visual content, tend to simplify and reproduce well-known symbolic narrative structures, (Kruse 2018). Judeo-Christian iconography and ideology echo throughout these representations telling us of unambiguous victims, villains, and saviours (Wright 2002).
- 8 Particular aesthetic canons that link beauty and terror – depicting ragged figures of people, natural and/or man-made catastrophes, ruins, and shipwrecks – are part and parcel of this visual culture, which, by challenging what is morally accepted, measures the audience’s pity and capacity of mobilising (an often outsourced) reaction (Boltanski 1999). In effect, most visual expressions of displacement invariably resort to a set of purposeful visual tropes in which despair and the moment of emergency become crystallised in time, in “peaks of present” (Deleuze 2013:106) that condense and seem to confine other possible pasts, presents and/or futures. But these “peaks of present”, glimpses into the emergency, are mere stills from a much longer film. And yet, the same visual approach is iterated despite the changes and transformations that might occur over time while displaced. The truth is that we have a less clear view of how people forge a life beyond the initial emergency, on how the spaces of protracted refuge evolve and consolidate – even if this could tell us about a lesser-known constellation of stories (Neto 2020). The “invisibility” of alternative stories is only broken upon the renewed portrayal of another emergency – or the protracted same—, in which once again the “biopolitical obfuscates the biographical” (Fassin 2012), in which once again the depicted potentially imagined futures are threatened (Brun 2016).
- 9 The plight of displaced populations living in refugee camps has been described as one of suspended temporality and interstitial place as it produces a liminal experience of the social world (Agier 2011). In addition, as has been noted, “the ‘future’ is dealt with and partly made irrelevant in much of current humanitarian practices”, encapsulating a general feeling of refugees “being stuck” in time (Brun 2016:394). This feeling comprises not only the displaced populations themselves, but also those who work in the field, probably the outer world that watches emergencies from afar. The experience and perception of stillness greatly contributes to the times and spaces of politico-legal ambiguity managed through more or less indeterminate, often liminal categories (asylum seeker, refugee, population of concern, migrant) and the exceptional spaces in which the displaced endlessly wait for “durable solutions” – including how incommensurable the futures arising thereof can be (Ramsay 2017). The way in which displacement is visually represented certainly plays a role in constructing a feeling of latency, expectation – of stillness. *Still lifes* coalesce with still lives.

Still 3 Title – Padlock



A repurposed worn-out bike chain is used to lock a house.
Still from the film *Withering Refuge*, Pedro F. Neto 2020

Still 4 - Curtain



A curtain gently oscillates with the breeze.
Still from *Withering Refuge*, Pedro F. Neto 2020

- Created five decades ago to respond to the growing influx of refugees arising from the conflict in Angola (1961-2002), the Meheba Refugee Settlement expanded over time, hosting populations from armed conflicts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Rwanda, Burundi, and Somalia. Right before the end of hostilities in Angola in 2002, the camp's population reached a maximum of more than 50.000 dwellers. This settlement now extends for more than 720 square km – roughly the size of Singapore or the Bahrein – much as a result of its agricultural character, but also of changing demographics and respective categories. As of September 2022, Meheba counted an official population of 34,360, of which the majority is composed of recently arrived refugees from the DRC³.

- 11 I have been studying the region in which the Meheba refugee camp is located since 2012, examining the urban development of the humanitarian setting (Neto 2014), the ambiguous boundaries between inclusion and exclusion in refugee camps (Neto 2018), exploring ways of studying and grasping the constant mobilities and life strategies of displaced populations (Neto 2019a) and how to frame protracted displacement otherwise (Neto 2020). From the outset, I was impelled to make some sort of film about this place, its dwellers and broader dynamics – an idea that I would invariably abandon for different reasons. During fieldwork in 2012 and 2014 I was confronted with several institutional constraints: from the complex process of obtaining a permit to enter the camp and the surveillance arising thereof, the then ongoing repatriation convoys in the eve of the first Angolan presidential elections of 2012 and following the failed requests to be able to vote in exile, to the tighter security control related to the turmoil related to corruption in the distribution and access to food cards and gate passes (Neto 2019b). In early 2018, despite the daily arrival of refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the atmosphere was calmer than before. Most of the people again conformed to the constraints of forced displacement. In this period of fieldwork, I counted on the trust of most of my interlocutors, having discussed with them the possibility of making a film and its terms. However, I kept thinking about what the contribution of such a film would be, the consequences for those depicted, and the risks of slipping into renewed commonplaces.
- 12 In 2014 I had met a group of Brazilian photographers (Coletivo Altavista) working for the Refugee Alliance (now Brave Heart) whose mission was to photograph the inhabitants of the camp so that the Norwegian non-governmental organisation could raise funds for its activities. Despite the very different socioeconomic situations found in Meheba, the photographers picked the most disenfranchised and isolated community, composed of refugees from Rwanda. The families depicted were given a copy of their portraits. The pictures were eventually showcased in different galleries and international events.⁴
- 13 I then wondered what else could be pictured, or at least pictured differently. Instead of abandoning the intent of making a film, I kept collecting film clips, photos, ambience sounds, recording interviews and conversations, for what I used different devices (digital photo camera, video camera, 35mm photo-camera, portable audio recorder, mobile phone with different audio and video recording apps).
- 14 For a while, these materials were used to inform and illustrate academic writings and presentations. But at each revisitation the materials spoke to me differently. I felt growingly compelled to explore the possibilities of depicting this place. And it started by dropping images and fragments of moving images into a timeline. While some connections and relations were sought in close dialogue with field notes, many others were accidentally found. At the same time, the process of (re)assembling and (re)shaping photographs, film clips, and audio recordings was marked by an attempt to render intelligible certain conceptual notions drawn from recurring debates in the field of forced migration through cinematic techniques of montage. Despite the risks of the (mis)translations from one medium to another and the (re)significations this could eventually create (see Benjamin 1969), with *Withering Refuge* I sought to interrogate ideas often mentioned in the literature. Suspended time, stillness, undefined space, invisibility, voicelessness, refuge.

- 15 The essay format allowed this exploration, something arguably more complex to achieve by walking through the ethnographic film. As Nora Alter suggested, the representation of the “real” is easier through the essay film as it allows to freely roam from fiction to non-fiction, “in a neutralizing zone where fiction is unfictionalized” (Alter 2018:5). After the juxtaposition of fact and fiction, the truth of the film essay is located in its untruths (2018:16). A more essayistic tone revealed to be more comfortable too. Not everything can be described or literally depicted, and it avoids the uneasiness of being confronted with “real tears” — as it is said on why Krzysztof Kieslowski engaged in fiction to the detriment of documentary film (cf. Zizek 2005).

Still 5 - Balls



Steel grinding balls used to extract the ore from the waste rock.
Still from the film *Withering Refuge*, Pedro F. Neto 2020

Still 6 - Bottles



Water samples from underground wells.
Still from the film *Withering Refuge*, Pedro F. Neto 2020

- 16 The territory in which Meheba is located changed dramatically over the years, much as a result of growing demographics, rapid and uneven urbanisation, extractive and developmental endeavours. In the early 1970s, this was virtually uninhabited pristine forest land. The main road connecting the nearest town of Solwezi with the border with Angola, intersecting the entrance of the camp, was tarred by and for humanitarian operations upon the deployment of the camp. Today, this region is commonly referred to as the New Copperbelt, alluding to the resurge in mining from the mid-2000s of essentially copper, but also cobalt, gold, and uranium. This development is a reminder of the resource depletion of the neighbouring Copperbelt province.
- 17 The potential economic opportunities arising from extractive operations have been attracting people from other parts of Zambia, as well as from other countries in the region and beyond. Overall, this has resulted in major demographic shifts, rapid and uneven urbanisation, added pressure on resources, and rampant inflation. Given that the camp is located between Kalumbila and Kansanshi mines, and contiguous to Lumwana mine in Manyama town, some of the newly arrived, to-be-miners' individuals have started to rent or buy property in the humanitarian setting. While an illegal practice, fact is that some of Meheba's administration members and the more well-off refugees benefit from the camp's "real estate" market.
- 18 A large group described by the UNHCR as "populations of concern", composed of many second and third-generation refugees have recently qualified for local integration programmes, now being under the umbrella of the UNDP. Local integration involves the relocation to the peripheral areas of the camp — of "just bush!" as people say —, and the engagement in intensive agriculture. "Populations of concern" are allocated 10Ha of farmland, fourfold what refugee households are given upon arrival to the camp, and in a push for development, are encouraged to grow essentially maize and soy using enhanced seeds (Neto 2020). The ambiguous nature of the Meheba Refugee camp is known to those who live in and around it (Neto 2018). Expectations are constantly recalibrated.
- 19 Beyond housing, also schools and clinics, which have been long considered of higher quality in comparison to local and national standards, attract non-refugees. Hence, it is not surprising that since 2014, plans exist to transform the oldest parts of the camp into a new urban settlement connected to the neighbouring ever-sprawling Manyama town. This area already counts with some relevant infrastructure (several schools, clinics, police barracks, covered market, shops, solid housing, and churches), and is located next to the main national road.
- 20 Furthermore, mining activities have been conquering new territories, displacing local communities and fauna, extracting humans and non-humans alike. To host some of the fauna that lived in the extracting sites, private wildlife refuges with conditional biodiversity have been created, reinventing a "third nature" (Hughes 2005). In the Kansanshi Golf Estate (Kansanshi Mine), a double-fenced gated community contiguous to the extraction, some of the most inoffensive fauna roam around the golf course. Likewise, this is one of the enclaves where also most of the employed *expats* found their refuge (see Diken 2004).
- 21 The violence of present and past conflicts that largely contribute to the birth of this place is growingly coupled with the "slow violence" of developmental and mining endeavours and the environmental degradation arising thereof (Nixon 2011). Streams

and groundwater are increasingly improper for human and animal consumption as the result of Lumwana mine operations, in the immediate vicinity of Meheba. As the land and life beneath the feet of the populations living in and around Meheba disappear, displacement precedes actual movement (Nixon 2011). In the meantime, large-scale exploration licences⁵ have been issued to Meheba's territory.

- 22 All these portraits and accounts of a dying “nature” and question the possibilities of refuge — where and for whom. The stills and stillness of several interrupted paths capture and render visible the harnessed mobilities entangled in unfolding displacement.
- 23 Still lifes, still lives; *natura-morta*, *nature morte*, *natureza morta*.

Still 7 - Hoe



An abandoned hoe in a derelict playground.

Still from the film *Withering Refuge*, Pedro F. Neto 2020

Still 8 - Blood



Freshly chopped trees exude sap.

Still from the film *Withering Refuge*, Pedro F. Neto 2020

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NOTES

1. *Withering Refuge* was screened at conferences (POLLEN 2020, IASFM 19, UNCHR 70th Anniversary Int. Conference, AAG 2021) and film festivals (Ethnofest 2022, DokumentArt 2022, Riga Pasaules 2021, Entretodos 2021, Sjón 2021, etc.). In 2021, it was awarded the Best Ethnographic Film by the Portuguese Association of Anthropology (APA). The film will be published as a film-article in *Crossings: Journal of Culture and Migration* 15(1), in 2024.
 2. The paper, titled “Suspended Refuge - Visual and Ethnographic Insights from a Refugee Camp”, was first presented at the EASA 2020 Biannual (online) Conference, part of the panel: “Filming Ethnographic Futures: ethnographic film and future-making in critical contexts”, convened by Anna Lisa Ramella, Martin Gruber, and Johannes Sjöberg, and chaired by Alexandra D'Onofrio.
 3. *Zambia. Operational Update*, UNHCR September 2022. Available at <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/96527>, (accessed January 09, 2023).
 4. See <https://www.extraclasse.org.br/cultura/2016/05/incursao-pelos-retratos-de-familias/>, or <https://www.instagram.com/p/lvZLFoqPwf/> (both accessed in January 09, 2023).
 5. Zambia's Mining Cadastre Portal, available at <https://portals.landfolio.com/zambia/> (accessed January 09, 2023).
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ABSTRACTS

Withering Refuge (2020) is a film-article that explores visual representations of displacement and the possibilities of refuge amidst environmental decline, developmental and extractive endeavours, in and around Meheba Refugee Camp, Zambia. This article interrogates the tropes of *still life* artworks as it displays a collection of film stills from *Withering Refuge*. Selected images not only dialogue with the temporal, spatial and social stillness often depicted in *still lifes* and described in the forced migration literature as, drawing on the Latin version of *still life* (*nature-morte*), the piece ultimately invites readers-viewers to reflect on the current situation in the region and the uncertain prospects for those seeking refuge writ large.

Withering Refuge (2020) est un film-article qui explore les représentations visuelles du déplacement et les possibilités de refuge face au déclin environnemental, des efforts de développement et des entreprises extractives, dans et autour du camp de réfugiés de Meheba, en Zambie. Cet article interroge les tropes des natures-mortes (*still lifes*) alors qu'il présente une collection d'images fixes/cadres de *Withering Refuge*. Les images sélectionnées entrent en dialogue non seulement avec l'immobilité temporelle, spatiale et sociale souvent représentée dans les natures mortes et décrites dans la littérature sur les migrations forcées, mais, en s'appuyant sur la version latine de *still life*, la nature-morte, cet article invite finalement les lecteurs et spectateurs à réfléchir à la situation actuelle dans la région et aux perspectives incertaines pour ceux qui cherchent refuge.

Withering Refuge (2020) es un filme-artículo que explora las representaciones visuales del desplazamiento y las posibilidades de refugio en medio del deterioro ambiental, del desarrollo y extracción, en el Campo de refugiados de Meheba y sus alrededores, en Zambia. Este artículo interroga los tropos de las obras de arte de bodegones (*naturaleza-morta/still lifes*) mientras muestra una colección de fotogramas de *Withering Refuge*. Las imágenes seleccionadas no solo

dialogan con la quietud temporal, espacial y social que a menudo se representa en las naturalezas-muertas y se describe en la literatura sobre migración forzada, y al mismo tiempo, basándose en la versión latina de la naturaleza-muerta (nature-morte), la pieza finalmente invita a los lectores-espectadores a reflexionar sobre la situación actual en la región y las perspectivas inciertas para quienes buscan refugio.

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Palabras claves: África, cine, migración forzada, multimodalidad, representación, desplazamiento, refugiados, campos de refugiados

Keywords: Africa, film, forced migration, multimodality, representation, displacement, refugees, refugee camps

Mots-clés: Afrique, cinéma, migration forcée, multimodalité, représentation, déplacement, réfugiés, camps de réfugiés

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