

Stan Douglas

The Secret Agent

7 May – 10 July 2016

Textbook

**SALZBURGER  
KUNSTVEREIN**

*New film installation by artist Stan Douglas examines terrorism and political identity in Europe through combined lenses of history and fiction*

Canadian artist Stan Douglas's new six-channel video installation is an adaptation of the 1907 novel *The Secret Agent*, by Joseph Conrad. The book recounts a failed bombing attempt of the Greenwich Observatory in London, inspired by a real event in 1894. *The Secret Agent* film installation sets the action and characters from the novel within the context of Portugal's so-called "Hot Summer" of 1975. This was the turbulent period between "The Carnation Revolution" in 1974 and the ratification of a new constitution, when numerous terrorist acts by extreme right- and left-wing groups rocked the country.

The Carnation Revolution marked the end of the Portuguese dictatorship, which was longest authoritarian regime in Western Europe. The left-leaning Armed Forces Movement that organized the coup d'état had wide popular support due to its opposition to the ongoing complications of the colonial wars in Africa. The Hot Summer that followed nearly precipitated a civil war. The threat of an unstable Western Europe leading up to the elections in April 1976 was taken seriously by NATO, which conducted war games in the region. At that time, the United States dispatched battleships to keep watch off the coast. All of Portugal and much of the world was anticipating an extraordinary event that could be as transformative as the Carnation Revolution itself.

This engrossing and sophisticated film installation combines fiction with history, revisionism with speculation, and political identities with literary ones. Stan Douglas' characterizations and story-telling are always much more than meets the eye. His artwork often disrupts conventions of film-making and the audience's relationship to the spectacles of cinema, photography and history.

A new publication printed by Ludion in collaboration with Wiels (Brussels) accompanies the exhibition.

Special thanks to Victoria Miro Gallery, London and Blaue Gans, Salzburg.

**Curatorial tours by Director Séamus Kealy**

**Sa, 21 May 2016, 4 pm**

**Sa, 2 July 2016, 6 pm**

Austrian and German Art University Workshops

17 – 20 June 2016

## Biography

Born in 1960 in Vancouver, Stan Douglas is a world-renowned visual artist living and working in Vancouver and Los Angeles. Between 1979 to 1982, he attended the Emily Carr College of Art + Design in Vancouver.

Since the late 1980s, Douglas has produced photographs, films and installations that examine social-political narratives, combine history with fiction, and offer profound analyses of the contemporary subject. His works are often rooted in a range of complex historical and literary material that has included references to the writings of Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett, Theodor W. Adorno and E.T.A. Hoffmann, and the films of Alfred Hitchcock, Akira Kurosawa and Orson Welles.

From 1982 to 1983, Stan Douglas made installations with projected slides, which he presented in movie theatres. In 1988 he curated the exhibition *Samuel Beckett: Teleplays*, which included eight Beckett works for film and television, and toured internationally. In 1989 his first series of short works for television, the twelve *Television Spots* (1988), was broadcast on television as commercials. In 1992 Douglas's *Monodramas* (1991) were broadcast on television as well. That same year, the artist edited and designed the influential book *Vancouver Anthology: The Institutional Politics of Art*. In 1992, as the guest of the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, he created *Hors-champs*, which examined the free jazz developed by African American expatriates in Paris in the 1960s. His mesmerizing 1995 film installation *Der Sandmann*, in the form of a continual loop and made while on a DAAD residency in Berlin, took as its source the ETA Hoffmann narrative that Freud had later analysed. In 1997–98, he worked on a series of photographs, *Detroit Photos*, that document the devastated American city and its auto industry. A related film installation, *Le Detroit*, was completed in 1999. His film *Inconsolable Memories* revisited the novel of the same name by Edmundo Desnoes as well as the 1968 film *Memories of Underdevelopment* also based on this novel, both set in Havana, Cuba.

Working mostly as a film director in producing both photographs and films, Douglas works with large casts, costumes and stage design to revisit historic moments through complex narratives. This process applies both to his films and his photographs. For example, his critically acclaimed photographic series *Crowds and Riots* (2008) explores crowd phenomena and forms of uprising (or the quashing of such) in the twentieth century in his native Vancouver. With the photography series *Midcentury Studio* (2010–11), Douglas crafted a vernacular

of 1950s photography into an astounding, surrealistic photo series. Here he had assumed the role of a fictitious press photographer in post-war North America. With the subsequent series *Disco Angola* (2013), he invented a 1970s photojournalist who documented both the Angolan civil war and the early days of the New York underground disco scene.

Douglas's artwork has been featured in major group exhibitions, including the 1995 Carnegie International; the 1995 Whitney Biennial; the 1997 Skulptur Projekte Münster; the 1997 Documenta; the 1998 Berlin Biennial; the 2000 Biennale of Sydney; the 2001 Istanbul Biennial; the 2002 São Paulo Biennale; the 2002 Documenta; the 2005 Venice Biennale; and the 2011 Moscow Biennale, among many others. Recent large-scale solo exhibitions include presentations at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin (2015); Haus der Kunst, Munich (2014); Carré d'Art-Musée d'Art Contemporain, Nîmes (2013); Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minnesota (2012); The Power Plant, Toronto (2011); Staatsgalerie Stuttgart and Württembergischer Kunstverein, Stuttgart (2007); and The Studio Museum in Harlem, NY (2005). This is his second exhibition at the Salzburger Kunstverein, having exhibited his work *Win Place or Show* there in 1998.

## **Key Awards**

2016 Winner of Hasselblad International Photography Award, Sweden  
2015 World Technology Award for the Arts, New York  
2013 Scotiabank Photography Award, Toronto  
2012 Infinity Award, International Center of Photography, New York  
2011 Mayor's Arts Awards, Vancouver  
2009 Honorary Doctoral Degree, Emily Carr University of Art + Design, Vancouver  
2008 Bell Award in Video, The Canada Council for the Arts, Ottawa  
2007 Hnatyshyn Foundation Award, The Hnatyshyn Foundation, Ottawa, Canada  
2001 Arnold Bode Prize, Documenta, Kassel  
1999 Gershon Iskowitz Prize, The Gershon Iskowitz Foundation and the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto  
1998 Coutts Contemporary Art Foundation Award, Coutts Bank, Zürich  
1996 Mies van der Rohe Stipendium, Kaiser Wilhelm Museum, Krefeld, Germany  
1994-1995 DAAD Scholarship, Berlin

Stan Douglas, *The Secret Agent*, 2015, six-channel-videoinstallation, sound, 54 min 53 sec. © Stan Douglas. Courtesy the artist, David Zwirner, New York/London and Victoria Miro, London.

The catalogue is available in our shop:

**Stan Douglas. *The Secret Agent*, 2015, Graphic Matter/Ludion, Euro 39,90**

## Portugal and the Future

Text by Jason E. Smith

“The class struggle in Portugal has from the very beginning been dominated by a direct confrontation between the revolutionary workers organised in autonomous assemblies and the Stalinist bureaucracy allied with a few defeated generals.” — Guy Debord<sup>1</sup>

The Portugal that experienced the so-called “Carnation Revolution” of 25 April 1974 was a historical anomaly. An imperial power, with large colonial holdings in southern Africa, the Portuguese metropole itself was characterised by extraordinary social and political backwardness, an outlier among European nations. The Portuguese economy was, by European and North American standards, primitive in every regard. Its largest sector by far was agrarian, divided between vast plantation-style latifundia in the south of the country, and small subsistence farming in the north. Portugal’s technologically impoverished agriculture, whose low yields were further exacerbated by a notoriously stingy soil, was complemented by an almost total absence of domestic manufactured goods, and correspondingly tiny consumer markets. The country’s infrastructure – its roads, ports and railways – was particularly rudimentary, and its property relations and arrangements almost feudal in character. The military, moving easily between regime and oligarchical families, maintained an outsized place in Portuguese society and everyday life.<sup>2</sup> That such a stagnant society, a small nation with a large fraction of its small population working elsewhere in Europe – their remittances a key source of income back home – would pretend to be capable of managing a vast overseas empire was paradoxical in the extreme.

If the military during the Salazar years had long played a predominant role in Portuguese society, this presence spiked dramatically in the years leading up to the “Carnation Revolution” of 25 April 1974. By 1973, the burden of the colonial

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<sup>1</sup> Guy Debord, “Refutation of All The Judgments, Pro or Con, Thus Far Rendered On The Film ‘The Society Of The Spectacle’”, *Complete Cinematic Works*, trans. Ken Knabb (Oakland: AK Press, 2003), p. 118.

<sup>2</sup> “The logic of economic archaism, brutal exploitation and omnipresent foreign capital is a political regime of permanent violence. Only a massive machinery of repression could keep the whole intolerable structure in place. The Salazar dictatorship [was] precisely this.” Perry Anderson, “Portugal and the End of Ultra-colonialism”, *New Left Review* 1/15 (May–June 1962), p. 88.

empire and its counter-insurgency wars required lengthening military conscription to an unprecedented four years: some 142,000 troops were stationed in Portugal's African outposts, an enormous number for a country of less than 10 million, while defence expenditures now consumed some half of the country's paltry GDP.<sup>3</sup> Dissent welled up discreetly within the officer corps over the course of the early 1970s; in the months just before the dissolution of the Salazar regime altogether, it weathered an abortive military coup from within and the dynamiting, by a group calling itself the "Revolutionary Brigades", of a military transport ship due to set out for the colonies.<sup>4</sup> A group of junior military officers calling itself the "Armed Forces Movement" (MFA: *Movimento das Forças Armadas*) was in position, by late April, to carry out a bloodless coup. The army was greeted in the streets with the famed carnations that gave the coup, or "revolution", its name. Euphoria ensued as, overnight, the listless and violent Estado Novo regime was dropped, or so it seemed, into the historical void.

The coup of 25 April was successful due not simply to its blessing by wide swathes of the Portuguese people. It came off largely because it had the backing of a significant portion of the bourgeoisie, whose fortunes lagged under Salazarismo's archaic and irrational social relations and its unmanageable colonial possessions. For them, the "revolution" of April was resolutely a revolution for a properly Portuguese modernity: a modernisation and rationalisation of Portuguese capitalism and society. In the case of Portugal in particular, this meant finally following the lead of the French and British in the formal relinquishment of their imperial holdings. But for many in Western Europe, in the twilight of the *Trente Glorieuses* of European post-war economic expansion, a modernized capitalism entailed an inclination towards a state-managed capitalist economy: one guaranteeing high wages and full employment, with production and consumption meticulously coordinated and planned, rationally and not through the crisisprone mechanisms of the markets, with not a little help from recent innovations in cybernetics and mainframe computing. The progressive bourgeoisie of these years dreamed not of seeking out new exploitable labour pools, stagnant profit-taking in the financial sector, or a frontal attack on the organised working class, such as would become the norm even by the late 1970s, after the neoliberal turn. *Modernity* meant, for much of the Portuguese military and ruling class, throwing off the irrationality and

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<sup>3</sup> "Portugal's Colonies: Echoes of Another Century", *New York Times*, 4 November 1973.

<sup>4</sup> In 1971, this same group blew up a NATO communications centre outside Lisbon, an event echoed in Douglas's video.

anachronism of the feudal arrangements of their country's stagnant economy, in favour of a dynamic, state-directed, socialist plenty.

Schematising to the extreme, we can say that the coup of 25 April was the opening move in a complex revolutionary process that, after the sudden collapse of Salazarismo, unfolded over more than a year and a half and in two distinct stages. Over the first eleven months of this sequence, the world witnessed a relatively classical "bourgeois" revolution undertaken primarily by these progressive bourgeoisies and by their military stand-ins or allies in the MFA, both converging against a backward, corporatist, feudal society and a more or less fascist old-regime elite. This opening phase of the revolutionary process also witnessed other social forces wading into the fray, not least in a wave of strikes some weeks after the April coup, but also in the form of the newly legalised Portuguese Communist Party (PCP), which immediately assumed key ministerial duties in a series of national-unity governments formed around the ex-Salazar confidant General (and now President) Spínola.<sup>5</sup> For the first eleven months of this post-fascist Portugal, the Communist Party played a supporting role in a government whose core source of legitimacy was a nominally apolitical alliance between the MFA and the "people". This first phase of the revolution came to a predictable end with not one but two separate coup attempts on the part of Spínola, the first in September 1974, and then a second and last attempt in March 1975.

The failure of this second, unsuccessful coup attempt launched the "revolution within the revolution", or the properly proletarian phase of the historical events unfolding in Portugal. This second phase was initially spearheaded by an empowered Communist Party that, with the aid of PCP-aligned factions within the broader Armed Forces Movement, made its move on state power, increasingly dominating the succession of provisional governments that came and went between March and August of that year. By June 1975, the Communist Party had its hand on almost all levers of classical power, be they those of the state, the media, trade unions, or the military. It was precisely at this cresting of its authority across Portuguese society that another social force arose, however, to contest this hegemony, this time from the Party's left: a

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<sup>5</sup> This "progressive" bourgeoisie was ample enough to include figures such as the eventual president of the First Provisional Government, the monocle General António de Spínola, a one time confidant of Salazar who, in 1973, called for a moderate version of this modernisation. In a book significantly titled *Portugal e o futuro* (Portugal and the Future), he proposed among other reforms a formal relinquishment of the colonies of the southern cone of Africa, offering nominal and political independence in exchange for an advantageous economic dependence and "partnership".



powerful grassroots movement rooted in workplaces in industry and the countryside, making its presence felt in a wave of occupations, of factories, farms, housing, and, indeed, entire neighbourhoods and even regions (particularly that of Alentejo). These movements operated largely out of the control of the dominant political parties and groupings, if sometimes with their distant approbation or tolerance; the organs of power they spontaneously created were clearly distinct from classical forms of worker power characteristic of the international workers' movement (unions, parties).

After June 1975, a very peculiar dynamic took shape. Within the social and geographic bases of the left and far left, rivalry, tension and even conflict emerged between the Communist Party and its military allies and this broad-based proletarian movement, which bucked beneath the pressure of the PCP and its bureaucratic direction, opposing a vision of worker self-management to the nationalisations and trade union-based vision deployed by the PCP. Much of the rest of the country was opposed to this “red” core region, but in particular the north, whose smallholding peasantry remained outside the dynamics of the Lisbon- and Alentejo-anchored upheaval—peasants who desperately clung to their tiny, inherited, plots of unproductive soil, and who remained in the thrall and under the thumb of the Catholic Church, long a partner with Salazar in the archaic forms of underdevelopment prevalent in Portuguese life. The substance of Portuguese society had become extremely volatile, with the prospect of the Communist Party seizing full power perceived as a threat by almost all of the actors involved. And not only the entrenched right in the north or the occupations movement to its far left: another key actor in the situation, the United States, suddenly found itself confronted with the possibility of (or so it feared) a Soviet beachhead at the very mouth of the Mediterranean. NATO lurked, menacingly, just offshore; contingency plans for the capture of the Portuguese Azores were made; the CIA sprang into action, funding the “centrist” parties of the right and left. A wave of forest fires struck the countryside. From Franco's Spain, old-regime elites plotted with recently arrived *retornados* from the colonies, while Communist Party headquarters were attacked across the country. Bombings were carried out by the extreme right and left. Plots abounded on all sides.

“What do I care?

I'm just a starving bomb maker. I have no future.

I disdain the future but I am a force.”

— The Professor

Stan Douglas's *The Secret Agent* is a six-channel video installation re-creating Portugal's "Hot Summer" of 1975, a little over one year into the ongoing revolutionary process opened by the MFA coup of April 1974. It was shot in March 2015 on location in Lisbon, with British and Portuguese actors, almost exactly forty years after the events described in the film are meant to have happened.<sup>6</sup> The action is set within the shadowy, clandestine margin of the Portuguese mass movement, largely in the back alleys and bars of Lisbon. Everything takes place at a remove from the great drama of history playing itself out in the squares, the factories, the countryside and the government ministries. At its centre is a small cinema managed by the central character of the video, Verloc, and his wife, Winnie. This theatre, as the posters we see in the lobby attest, plays largely art house fare from the rest of Europe, often shading into "soft" pornography: *I am Curious (Yellow)*, *Last Tango in Paris*, *The Mother and the Whore*. At one key point early in the film, we see one of Verloc's gang, Michaelis, alone in the theatre watching Bertolucci's film, tears running down his face. Moments later, we find ourselves in the projection booth where the conspiratorial cohort meet. On water-stained ceiling tiles we now see the film itself project, the images inverted, barely legible. In the meantime, Michaelis justifies to his contemptuous comrades his emotional response to the film: "Sorry – the film is beautiful. Paul's loss reminds me of my own. It is a loss we will all share." Though Michaelis identifies his loss with that of Marlon Brando's character Paul (whose wife has committed suicide), we do not know what this suicide "reminds him of", nor why he claims this loss is one from which we all suffer, and share. Who, moreover, is this "we" he speaks of? Those in the room with him? The masses mobilised by the Portuguese revolutionary movement? Or indeed those of us in the room with *The Secret Agent*, watching a six-channel video installation forty years after the events described in the video are said to have occurred?

A post-1968 Parisian motif more generally is maintained through the film, not only through the screening of *Last Tango in Paris* or the poster for Jean Eustache's *The Mother and the Whore* (from 1973, and often considered the film that best captures the mood of the *après-mai*); that is, by means of a cinematic mediation. It is also evident in the historical ties two key characters have with those events: Verloc, the anarchist double agent who uses the cinema as his cover, as well as Ossipon, a French Maoist and propagandist who was out of the country during the events of May 1968 and so finds himself in Lisbon seven years later, to recapture the "loss" he experienced seven years

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<sup>6</sup> Douglas originally conceived and developed *The Secret Agent* in 2008.

prior: his missed rendezvous with history. Both Bertolucci's and Eustache's films examine the sexual or libidinal fallout of the post-1968 period in Paris and elsewhere in France, exploring the way the largest general strike in the history of modern Europe mutated into forms of micropolitical experimentation, with sexual identities and practices the key target or terrain. In his extraordinary firsthand account and analysis of the revolution in Portugal from a far-left perspective, the Irish council communist Phil Mailer noted that one of the first measures taken by the MFA in 1974 was the disarming of the strict censorship boards maintained by the regime. Suddenly the country was awash in pornography. After the MFA "abolished the censorship boards," he writes, "pornography flooded the marketplace, competing for space on the newsstands alongside the political newspapers. Together, they were everywhere."<sup>7</sup> This cheek-by-jowl juxtaposition of politics and pornography takes a more synthetic and highbrow turn in Douglas's video, with Verloc's cinema doubling as a bookstore with Bataille's *L'érotisme* prominently displayed next to Fanon, and Ossipon's Maoist leaflets no doubt shuffled in among these titles.

Douglas's *The Secret Agent* is, of course, based on the 1907 novel of the same name by Joseph Conrad. Same cast of characters, with their mysterious foreign names, and same sequence of events, with adjustments made for the peculiarities of the new historical body onto which this story has been grafted. Much of the dialogue is drawn directly from Conrad's original. Though this precedent is nowhere openly evoked in Douglas's appropriation of Conrad's work, lurking throughout *The Secret Agent* is an earlier adaptation of the novel: Alfred Hitchcock's 1936 film *Sabotage*. This mediation is made clear by Douglas's treatment of one particular aspect of Conrad's narrative: his transformation of Verloc's "cover", in the novel a tawdry backstreet dispensary of soft pornography ("photographs of more or less undressed dancing girls", "a few books, with titles hinting at impropriety"<sup>8</sup>) into a movie theatre, making Verloc operate out of the cinema. The cinema: a medium and a historical form that the six-channel video we are surrounded by both takes part in and is distanced from, as a historical relic, one whose twilight can be dated in hindsight to around the "time" depicted in the video (the mid-1970s). This staging is

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<sup>7</sup> Phil Mailer, *Portugal: The Impossible Revolution?* (Oakland: PM Press, 2012), p. 36. Similar accounts abound. Brian Parkin, *British Trotskyist*: "But next along the stall is a selection of catholic pamphlets (a comrade tells me that most are on the church's teachings on birth control) as well as rosaries, crucifixes and saints cards and candles, next to which is the most lurid display of the most explicit pornography imaginable. Talk about uneven and combined development!"

<http://rs21.org.uk/2014/05/03/memoirs-of-a-revolution-portugal-1974/>

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent* (New York: Knopf, 1992), p. 1.

particularly important for understanding the historical operation performed, or proposed, by Douglas. The time that lapsed between the anarchist 1880s and the 1907 publication of Conrad's novel not only witnesses a mutation in the figure of anarchism and its place in the historical activity of the proletariat, it also occasions the invention of the cinema itself: a technology, set of conventions, and artistic form that would arguably, in aesthetic terms, dominate the century to come. The twentieth century is not only the short century of Soviet power, as proposed famously by Eric Hobsbawm's *Age of Extremes*, it is equally the century of cinema, one originating in the transformations of media technology of the 1890s (Edison's kinoscope is invented the same year, 1894, as the Greenwich Observatory is bombed, the "real" event on which Conrad's novel is based), and whose outer limit can most likely be dated by the widespread use of video, and in the field of art, the spatialisation of cinematic projection in the form of video installation. When in *The Secret Agent* Michaelis is seen weeping in a backstreet movie theatre, and lamenting an unidentified loss, it can be seen, with forty years' hindsight, to represent the fading of the cinema itself as a dominant cultural or artistic form: the end, in fact, of the short century of cinema.

Douglas's intervention takes on all of its significance with a second alteration of Conrad's narrative, this time a change in the nature of the target to be attacked with The Professor's imperfect bomb. In the novel, Mr Vladimir, in pressing Verloc to carry out a bombing that would "accentuate the unrest" roiling British society, transforming this unrest into open war, and bringing about a violent repression on the part of the too-tolerant British state, proposes London's Greenwich Observatory for what it represents: *science*. "Science", in the age of late nineteenth-century bourgeois society, is "the sacrosanct fetish of to-day," Vladimir declaims; the bourgeoisie as a class has as its core ideological commitment, the belief "that in some mysterious way science is at the source of their material prosperity".<sup>9</sup> In Douglas's version, Verloc, the anarchist veteran of the French May 1968, is on the payroll of the US government and answers to Vladimir, whose status as an "embassy official" is cover for his work in the American secret services. It was widely assumed throughout the Portuguese revolution that the CIA played an active role, often clandestinely supporting both old-regime elements and the moderate, "progressive" wing of the democratising forces at work in Portugal, the Socialist Party led by Mario Soares.<sup>10</sup> If in the historical unfolding of the Portuguese mass movement, the CIA and NATO

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<sup>9</sup> Conrad, *The Secret Agent*, pp. 25, 27.

<sup>10</sup> Phil Mailer recounts that a massive demonstration passed by the PS headquarters shouting "Out with the CIA, Out with NATO" (*Portugal: The Impossible Revolution?*, p. 75).

exerted for the most part indirect pressure on events – offering financial support to certain factions, or conducting “war games” off the coast of Lisbon, an implicit threat of invasion should the transition veer too far off course – Douglas has Verloc, under pressure from his handler, intervene dramatically in the delicate situation taking shape that “Hot Summer”: one more bombing in a wave of attacks, this time meant to tip the balance in favour of reaction and the return to order. After Verloc unimaginatively proposes going after “embassies”, Vladimir contemptuously waves away this idea:

Don't be facetious, Mr Verloc. You could blow up every embassy in Lisbon without influencing the public one bit. The only thing the Portuguese care about now is the future. They never want to be a backward country again. You anarchists hate the status quo and since bombs are your means of expression why not bomb modernity itself? What do you think about an assault on communication?

In Douglas's version of *The Secret Agent*, the Greenwich Observatory and its embodiment of science – with an implicit equation between the study of the movements of the heavens, and the “dismal science” of political economy, that bourgeois science par excellence – is replaced by the submarine cables carrying “communications” (in 1975: voices, writing; now: images). It is, we are led to speculate, this very material thing, these wires, these cables, that will become the new sacrosanct fetish of the Portuguese bourgeoisie: the “source”, that is, of “their material prosperity”. The future of Portugal is also that of the world, a future in which power – that is, the capacity to act in the now, to be modern – is located not in the old institutional husks of state power (the embassy), but in the webs of communication stitching together the globe: the virtual networks and the hardwiring through which value is pumped without cease.

Douglas's *The Secret Agent* is above all a film about modernity. It is “about” modernity, though, in a very special way: in the story, modernity is not merely evoked, it is targeted for attack. Significantly, it is not struck, it remains intact; the agent involved, or rather his surrogate, is blown to bits in the attempt. What could modernity have meant at the time; that is, the time *in* the film, the time of the Portuguese revolution? It meant quite simply what the revolution set out to achieve, or rather, what it ended up bringing about: the modernisation of Portugal. Contemporary witnesses considered the events that unfolded in Portugal – especially the wave of factory, farm and housing occupations, outside the framework of the classical “left” parties – to be among the most

radical ever seen in the history of the workers' movement. No less a witness than Guy Debord, not one given to optimistic overinflation of events, declared in a letter to some Portuguese friends that "it is clear that up to this point the modern proletariat has never gone so far".<sup>11</sup> The intensity and inventiveness of these struggles, however, ended up being a historical catalyst of a very special sort: a modernising development programme, bringing Portugal into the capitalist present. From the perspective of our present, to watch *The Secret Agent* is to measure the distance between the volatility of the time depicted – its modernising dynamism, its opening onto an indeterminate future – and the present of the crisis, our crisis. Ours is a present for which the modernity exhibited in 1975, as a historical drive or impulse, is now a kind of antiquity, now bathed in the glow of the "glorious" post-war period. Portugal arrived late to that moment of modernity, at its conclusion. Where revolutionaries across the Continent saw in the successes of the Portuguese mass movement the future of Europe, a shot off the historical bow, its "ongoing revolutionary process" would turn out to be the final, punctuating coda to a twentieth century defined by modernising processes masquerading as revolutionary ones.

That the first screening of Douglas's video will mark the fortieth anniversary of the "Hot Summer" it depicts makes *The Secret Agent* at once a commemoration and critical commentary on those events. It is, just as importantly, an oblique meditation on what has transpired in the forty years since the conclusion of the eighteen-month sequence in November 1975, with the failure of a Communist Party-inspired coup attempt, and the eventual triumph of Mario Soares's Socialist Party in the April 1976 elections.<sup>12</sup> In the lapse of the intervening four decades, much of what has taken place in Portugal is traceable to the transformative events of those short eighteen months. After the scripting of a new constitution and the establishment of a pattern of parliamentary "alternation" between centre-left and -right parties, and with the final disengagement from its African entanglements, a "modern" Portugal found itself brought into the bosom of the European market and indeed, eventually, the European Union. The time of the video's first screening is the future envisioned variously by all of the actors of the revolution, everyone from Spínola to the far-left actors of the period, both in and outside the Armed Forces Movement. It is, however, the onset of the global economic crisis of 2008 – echoing in many

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<sup>11</sup> See his letter dated 24 February 1975 in Guy Debord, *Correspondance*, Volume 5 (Paris: Fayard, 2005), p. 24.

<sup>12</sup> Since the 1976 elections, the Socialist Party (PS) has largely alternated places with its centre-right "opposition", the so-called "Social Democratic" Party (PPD/PSD), a party in turn often allied with the Christian Democrats (CDS).

ways a similar global crisis that occurred 1973–75, the very time of the Carnation Revolution – that shapes the present through which a contemporary viewer sees the video. Within the European Union, this crisis most dramatically affected its outer fringes, the so-called “PIIGS”, an acronym that includes Portugal as its first letter (Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece, Spain). In Portugal, the crisis ushered in an era of stagnation and disorientation, with high rates of unemployment, and a fruitless and cruel austerity programme administered by a centre-right coalition. Unlike its peer countries among the “PIIGS”, such as Spain and Greece, these conditions did not produce a dynamic anti-austerity movement along the lines of the global movement of the squares, nor has a leftist or left-populist political formation, such as Syriza or Podemos in Greece and Spain respectively, emerged outside of the moribund post-fascist “alternation”, each pole of which competes to administer the belt-tightening dictated by Portugal’s European creditors. The question of the ultimate success or failure of the Carnation Revolution therefore haunts the Portuguese present, and Douglas’s *The Secret Agent*. The future of Portugal meant economic and political modernisation, to be sure. But it also meant, with the dawn of the crisis, a future of no future, of directionless drift, a horizon of technocratically managed austerity, running up against little to no organized mass opposition.<sup>13</sup> In this way, we can encounter *The Secret Agent* with perhaps the same response as Michaelis, recognising ourselves in the future he foresees:

“Sorry – the film is beautiful. Paul’s loss reminds me of my own. It is a loss we will all share.”

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<sup>13</sup> This is not to say that there was no anti-austerity movement in Portugal, only that it was much more marginal than those found in Spain and Greece, and that it failed to give birth to new, mass political parties. The contrast with Spain is most telling. *The Economist*, in a recent article, speaks of “Austerity without anger” to describe the political mood in Portugal: <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21653653-perhaps-surprisingly-anti-austerity-and-populist-parties-are-not-doing-well-austerity-without>

## Capua corrupted Hannibal: A Few Notes on Stan Douglas' *The Secret Agent*<sup>1</sup>

Text by Séamus Kealy

*I have no doubt, however, that there had been moments during the writing of the book when I was an extreme revolutionist ... I was simply attending to my business. In the matter of all my books, I have always attended to my business. I have attended to it with complete self-surrender.*

Joseph Conrad, Author's Note, *The Secret Agent*, 1920<sup>2</sup>

Stan Douglas is often interested in neglected moments in history where events might have turned one way or another. Portugal in 1975 is one such moment, where after the Carnation Revolution, political reversals and turmoil shook the country. The United States was close to the Portuguese dictatorship that was the object of the revolution, and now found itself unsettled by the possible directions that the country might take. Already, Cold War tensions and colonial war had been playing out in Portugal's colonies Angola, Mozambique and Guinea.

This is the backdrop to Stan Douglas' version of *The Secret Agent*, a story first written in 1907 by Joseph Conrad, and recast throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in different film, theatre and television adaptations.<sup>3</sup> The artist's research for the photo series *Disco Angola* (2012) and the film *Luanda Kinshasa* (2013), that each referenced the liberation of Angola and its aftermath, also informs this work.<sup>4</sup>

This narrative of the colonies and their ongoing struggle is absent from *The Secret Agent*. This absence and other deliberate narrative gaps, as well as apparent lacks in the characters and their characterizations, set a number of determinative factors for the film and its presentation. Presented on six screens often depicting different sequences simultaneously, we witness fragmentation and re-suturing of circumstances between a re-told and re-imagined fiction (based loosely on real events), an actual historical context, and our own present, where our bodies are inserted between conversations and narratives.

Everything seems to have a pre-set outcome, from the stopped clock in the cinema suggesting a suspension of time, to the looped narrative itself emphasizing pre-determination. Moreover, key characters from the book are absent. While Michaelis, a central character in the plot, makes a brief appearance in the film, Stevie, who ends up blown to bits, never appears.<sup>5</sup>



Verloc, always the bumbling amateur with some never-evident talent for conspiracy, takes on the appearance of a secret agent, but is ultimately useless and pathetic. He is constantly called “lazy” by the American agent. The other characters exhibit their own neuroses. Yundt and Ossipon are not just bad anarchists; they are fake, even parasitic. “Everybody is mediocre,” declares the Professor in the book.

We watch the comic posturing, ongoing ineptitude, and ultimate failure of revolutionaries not despite but seemingly because of their ideological subjectivities. As opposed to Conrad’s “self-surrender” ostensibly engulfed in his “business,” each character in Stan Douglas’ version is corruptible and cliché while determined to continue in these identity-narratives. As with much of Douglas’ work, slippage of meaning and doubt are placed within and disrupt seemingly more coherent, grand narratives. Likewise, distrust for constructions of political subjectivity emerges, where imagined and real histories are intermingled and begin to reflect one another.

One history that determined Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* may be interesting to consider. The character Michaelis was based by Conrad on the Fenian, one-armed revolutionary Michael Davitt who died the year before the novel’s publishing.<sup>6</sup> Davitt fought for the Irish revolutionary cause throughout his life, and was elected as an MP while imprisoned (but refused the position by the state). He later lectured internationally on humanitarianism, agitated for the Boer cause, wrote and edited extensively, and was admired by Ghandi, while often misunderstood in post-war Ireland and Great Britain. Davitt advocated that violence was self-defeating and that underground, armed conspiracy merely invited infiltration by state agents as well as back-stabbing informants.<sup>7</sup> This anti-colonial activist and thinker is transformed by Conrad into an over-weight idealist serving probation, who struggles to formulate his political theories, and who, like Stevie, is no match for the dark forces about him.

In Douglas’ version, nobody is competent enough to play a role for the political future. They merely attend to their business like somnambulists. It is no coincidence that Verloc gives away his networks by talking in his sleep. These characterizations approach the comic where ideological discourses, or any conversations, are spoken mechanically. The American agent only furthers the fog of uncertainty with his jingoist meddling. The Professor gloats within his personalized Nietzscheanism, believing himself free by virtue of his own dark logic and ever-potential self-annihilation, but he is more a barfly than a revolutionary.<sup>8</sup> It is not only the anarchists who lack Conrad’s so-called “self-

surrender,” it is the police and officials as well. Everyone seems uncommitted to their situation, clueless to the unravelling political currencies, and on the brink of self-flight. Only one character breaks this tendency: Winnie interrupts the political paralysis by killing her husband, Verloc.

During the film’s denouement, a shot of the cinema audience appears in the overall sequence, likely watching *Last Tango in Paris*. They stare at the western dream-narrative, entranced in a disavowal of their condition, engorged instead in the bourgeois existentialism recently forbidden to them under the dictatorship.<sup>9</sup> They forget their tangled, colonial situation and its consequences, and blank out their unstable present. “Ah yes. The crowd,” says the Nietzschean Professor, outside the cinema, “... filthy countless multitude. Unconscious. Blind.”<sup>10</sup> His words conclude the circumstances that then re-commence and repeat themselves.

Texts from the catalogue

**Stan Douglas. *The Secret Agent*, 2015, Graphic Matter/Ludion, Euro 39,90**

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent*. Edited and with an introduction by Martin Seymour-Smith. (Penguin Books: Middlesex: 1984), p. 96. This term means that luxury ruins everyone. After Hannibal was victorious against the Romans, he rested within luxurious Capua, and thereafter met defeat.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 42.

<sup>3</sup> *The Secret Agent*, written by Joseph Conrad in 1907, has had many variations since then, including different film versions, a depoliticized film by Alfred Hitchcock in 1936, entitled *Sabotage* (and not to be confused with his 1930 film *The Secret Agent*, based on a Somerset Maugham story), and the unsuccessful 1996 film directed by Christopher Hampton, and starring Bob Hoskins. Television versions include a 1992 BBC series, and another upcoming BBC TV series.

<sup>4</sup> Stan Douglas wrote *The Secret Agent* in 2008 but was unable to produce it until 2015. *Disco Angola* and *Luanda Kinshasa* were “a way of making use of all the research I had done at a time.”

<sup>5</sup> “Stevie’s not there because he’s invisible to everyone but Winnie—and maybe it is he, not Verloc, who is the Secret Agent. Or not. The secret agent of this piece might turn out to be something altogether different (not a person at all) but it is definitely not Verloc.” From an email conversation with Stan Douglas, July 2015.

<sup>6</sup> See the introduction to *The Secret Agent* by Martin Seymour-Smith, p. 18.

<sup>7</sup> See T.W. Moody, *Davitt and the Irish Revolution*, (Oxford University Press, 1984).

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<sup>8</sup> “The Professor is more of a Nietzschean than a nihilist. My thought was that he felt as superior to ‘the crowd’ as members of the Fascist regime who kept the bulk of the population in an uneducated agrarian condition did. But you had everything in Portugal in 1975, all the way left all the way right and everything in between. The unique thing in the Carnation Revolution, though, was the rural collectivization of farms by farmers but my characters have no clue about that.” From an email conversation with Stan Douglas, July 2015.

<sup>9</sup> “One of the first things the MFA (Armed Forces Movement) did after the Revolution was to lift restrictions on freedom of speech—i.e. pornography—and of course European art house cinemas were awash with the stuff in the 1970s. I saw a documentary about the Revolution where an elderly woman standing in line to see *Last Tango in Paris* was asked if she knew what the film was about. No, she answered. Then why are you going to see it? Because it was banned and I want to see what they didn’t want me to see. *Last Tango* was a huge hit after the Revolution.” From an email conversation with Stan Douglas, July 2015.

<sup>10</sup> His final words are “Let them,” referring to the idea of the mass tearing him to pieces, as suggested by Inspector Heat. It appears appropriate that the Nietzschean professor has the last word (and a close-up) before the narratives re-starts.