

Title	Tamar Guimarães and Kasper Akhøj	Author	Ana Teixeira Pinto
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Tamar Guimarães and Kasper Akhøj

The Parrot's Tail is a short experimental video comprising five takes on the Western obsession with a primeval state of existence, before civilisational distortions set in. The backdrop for these fables is the personal history of Ernest Mancoba, a South African painter who co-founded the CoBRA group but whose legacy was marginalised by an ethnocentric art historical scholarship. Being African and avant-garde would, apparently, be considered an oxymoron, even for a multivalent artistic movement, which drew its influences from sources as diverse as folk, camp or outsider art. Mancoba spoke of being invisible, or visible only as the consort of a European artist – his was a precarious identity, without hope of resolution.

The first story takes its inspiration from a word play between pansies and pensée, the French word for thought. In English, Levi-Strauss' *La Pensée Sauvage* (1962), was rendered as *The Savage Mind*, but *pensée* (thought) suggests an intellectual or philosophical inclination, whereas mind has a rather more functional meaning: children or madmen have minds, but no *pensée* in the sense of an organised body of thoughts. In a similar way, *sauvage* means that which is wild or untamed, whereas savage connotes something uncivilized or brutish.

The hero in the first story plucks the *pansies/pensées* and eats them, raw at first, then cooked, evoking Levi-Strauss famous binary (*The Raw and The Cooked*), the empirical basis for all dialectical abstractions according to the French thinker.

After eating the flowers, which kept revolving around his innards, the hero begins to cast two shadows, perhaps one for each of the two worlds Plato described. The first one claims: 'Liberated from myself I am now free to think untamed thought!' As the man nods in agreement, his movements again match his first shadow, until the second, smaller one, eventually responds: 'There is no untamed thought. Only critique.'

One after the other, *The Parrot's Tail* revisits all modernist follies: from exoticism to surrealism, from becoming-savage to becoming-animal, amongst other fantasies about returning to an original, untainted, condition. The man/hero and all his friends dream of becoming cobra-like: slithery and smooth, coiling around the Tree of Life, which grows in the Garden of Eden, where life is plentiful and one can renounce partaking in the struggle-for-existence.

Peer pressure notwithstanding, the second shadow, which calls itself Half – perhaps because, like Mancoba, he is only half-modern – remains unconvinced, always finding a prompt retort: there is no becoming other; only critique. But, though clear-minded, Half is not unsusceptible to the appeal of this enchanted condition, freed of contradictions. Whilst all cobras in the garden begrudge their former friend One (Mancoba, the one whom they supposed would lead them in becoming-creature-like) for being unwilling to transmogrify, Half stumbles upon a parrot. Like Loulou, the parrot in Flaubert's tale, he is half-way between animal and holy ghost. He speaks of an Adamic language, of an ur-history when all beings were semiotically transparent to one another.

The visuals of *The Parrot's Tail* mimic Mancoba's stylised abstraction, halfway between script and sign, but they also resemble static in a turned-off TV set, or the standardised sequences of short and long 'dots' and 'dashes' in Morse code. Electricity, Marshall McLuhan argued, would undo alienation, returning humanity to a tribal state, in which all will

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fully participate in all things and 'live mythically and in depth'. This is what we call Third Nature, a techno-ecology promising to heal the wounds that modernity and industrialization inflicted on the social body and to reconcile humanity with nature via technology.

Convinced he would finally experience a revelation, Half feverishly plucks away the parrot's feathers, but finds nothing underneath: 'There is no reconciliation. Only critique.'