



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
Department of French, Hispanic & Italian Studies

RMST 202

Romance Studies,
Modernism to the Present

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*The Society of Reluctant
Dreamers: José Eduardo
Agualusa and
National Allegory*

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with Jon Beasley-Murray

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In part, the resonances and routes that connect these diverse locales are the legacy of Portuguese colonialism. But they also result from decades of Cold War proxy conflicts.



Jonas Savimbi, UNITA leader

“The war isn’t over, my friend.
It’s only sleeping.” (131)

At issue are the dreams that hold sway
while the violence slumbers, and
whether they foretell a resolution to
what seems to be an intractable problem
of division and discord.

It is the impulse to impose unity
and resolution that is itself the root
of the violence.



DREAM TIME

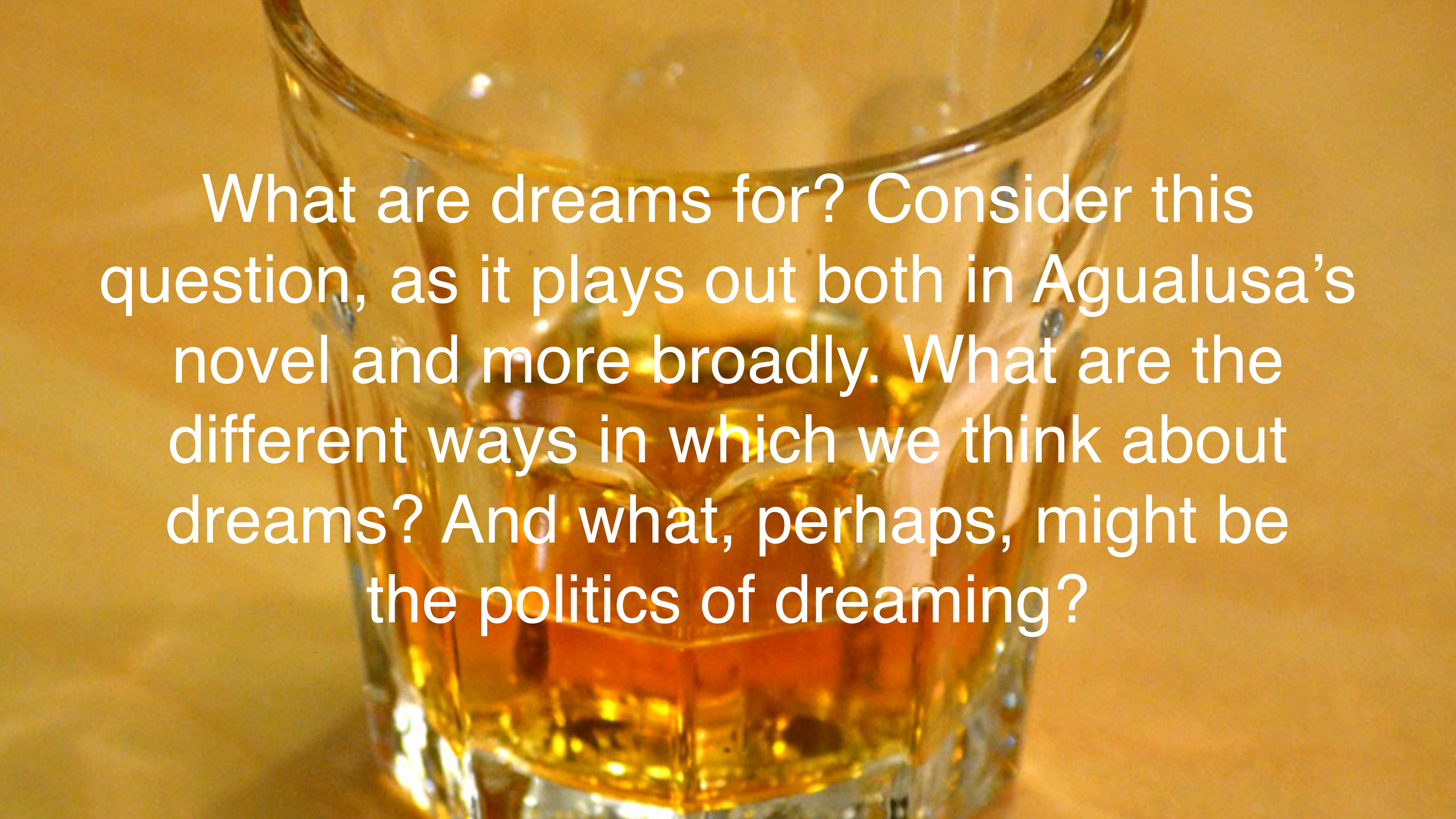
““You know, I dreamed about you,’ [. . .]
‘Yeah, I know it must seem a bit weird.’ [. . .]
‘It’s been a while since people dreamed
about me. [. . .] I used to appear in their
dreams wearing a purple coat.’” (42, 43)

“We should set up a
Republic of Dreamers.” (107)

“Unfortunately, people have stopped seeing the value of dreams. We need to restore dreams to their practical function.” (109)

In common parlance, dreams and practicality are opposed: a “dream” is precisely what is impractical, impossible, fantastic, or utopian.

What are dreams for? Consider this question, as it plays out both in Agualusa's novel and more broadly. What are the different ways in which we think about dreams? And what, perhaps, might be the politics of dreaming?



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For the dreamer, in Freud's account, a dream is the fulfilment of a wish that cannot be acknowledged in waking life. It can only make itself known in the distortions that constitute the essential "dream-work," by which ordinary memories and bits and pieces of everyday life are transformed and subjected to a new logic.

A dream is the result of a compromise between two opposing systems, as the otherwise censorious preconscious allows a “safety valve” for the expression of forbidden desires, discharging but also binding unconscious excitation to ensure that, if all goes well, it is “powerless to act as a disturbance” to the sleeper.

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Dreams betray something of
our true nature.

“And the value of dreams for giving us knowledge of the future? There is of course no question of that. It would be truer to say instead that they give us knowledge of the past. For dreams are derived from the past in every sense.” (Freud)

“Nevertheless the ancient belief that dreams foretell the future is not wholly devoid of truth. By picturing our wishes as fulfilled, dreams are after all leading us into the future. But this future, which the dreamer pictures as the present, has been moulded by his indestructible wish into a perfect likeness of the past.” (Freud)

Dreams, for Freud, are fundamentally conservative and ahistorical: they are part of a compulsion to repeat that blocks true novelty.

“It might be possible to remember future events, if they’re very important or very traumatic.” (171)

Here the dream is not so much the product of (psychic) repression as it is the means by which to defeat its political equivalent. In this collective dream (“It’s ours! It’s our dream!” [252]), the president of the day is quite literally diminished, cut down to size.

“The crowd received us with a single cry—
‘Freedom! Freedom!’—as it surged
forward, in an inexorable movement
of rejoicing, to meet the vast
helplessness of the soldiers.” (262)

At last, a country wracked by decades of warfare taps into a common dream to show that there is something more powerful than a gun!



DOUBLES, DECEIT, AND DEMOCRACY

“Here, too, there are people who
believe in utopias.

“Not me. I just watch. I’m an indolent
and dispassionate observer:
a Bantu flaneur.” (263)

“The problem is that you, and a lot of people like you, may be here in Luanda, but you don’t live here, with us. You don’t suffer with us. [. . .] In the old days, you used to immerse yourself in the real Angola, from time to time, at least to interview some poor wretch or another. You don’t even do that now.” (189)

The vision in which the journalist animates the protest movement and is then one of the first to confront the President, seems to show the writer making good on his duty to be committed to the national struggle. Moreover, the notion that dreams can bring about a desired future is an allegory for the idea that literature can fulfil a similar social function.

“‘In the beginning was the word.’ I used to believe that literature could outline the future. But not now, now I'm starting to think that literature creates the future.”

It is as though Agualusa himself recognized
that the dream of the “committed”
intellectual is no more than that: a dream.

The vision of a nation as one, united in a common dream, is at odds with a countervailing tendency towards multiplicity and excess.

The logic of the many dreams scattered through the text is that of return and repetition, which leads also to multiplication, extrapolation, and exaggeration.

“A scar like a black lightning flash, came down from his neck to his belly, unfolding and blossoming into a thousand delicate, precise bolts of light.” (38)

Doubling kickstarts a mechanism that generates uncountable multitudes, whose diverse multiplicity contrasts starkly with the image of one nation, one people.

As he navigates the plethora of doubles, twins, echoes, reproductions, and impersonations that litter the plot, Benchimol seldom shows much preference for the so-called original over its so-called copy, or rather he questions which is which.

“She seemed fake, all of a sudden,
a rather crude copy of the woman
of my dreams.” (94)

“I’ve always thought the truth very overrated. In democracy there isn’t one truth, there are versions. In a dictatorship, well, yes, then there’s only one truth: the official version.” (170)

The Society of Reluctant Dreamers wants both to offer us the fantasy of resolution, of an end to the fractures and fractiousness that have violently scarred Southern Africa's (post)colonial history, and also to suggest that the violence comes from repeated attempts to impose coherence and unity.

In the end the attempt to force closure
and resolution leads to catastrophe.


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and resolution leads to catastrophe.

Reluctantly, we have to
give up on that dream.



MUSIC

Pianochocolate,
“Romance”



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