Mourning the Living: Africa and the Elegy on Screen

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Abstract

This dissertation attempts to account for the prevalence of elegiac tropes in francophone African cinema. Considering films by African directors as well as those by non-African filmmakers who influenced and anticipated African cinema, this project looks comparatively at elegy and Africans on film from the earliest days of motion photography to the present day. Tracing elegy through the history of ethnographic film, the anti-colonial essay film, francophone African autobiographical film and the popular-art film hybrid, I argue that elegy provided a discourse for two overlapping movements. First, it served as the mode through which filmmakers defined the aesthetic and ideological goals of African cinema. Secondly, elegy permitted African cinema to narrate its own emergence and to assert its sense of belonging to a global history and discourse. In following these twin developments, we better understand Euro-American cinema's self-conscious expansion, however uneven and incomplete, into a global medium. Situating African cinema within this larger historical movement, this dissertation claims for it a key role in the consolidation of film genres and in the configuration of an elegiac aesthetic with a far-reaching, futuristic, even utopian vision of what cinema can be and do.

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Introduction

I first encountered francophone African cinema in the mid-aughts, just as films like Flora Gomes' *Nha Fala* (2001), Idrissou Mora Kpai's *Si Gueriki* (2002), and Jean-Pierre Bekolo's *Les Saignantes* (2005) were becoming available in American universities. Colorful and comedic, each film offered a richly distinct narrative world, ranging from spirited musical to intimate documentary to erotic thriller. Yet it was their common engagement with issues of death, mourning, and loss that really excited me. Just as I was beginning my preparatory work for the dissertation, I saw Alain Gomis' *Tey* (2013), which had won the Golden Stallion at the Pan-African Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou (FESPACO), one of the highest-profile awards in African cinema. *Tey*'s deeply original vision, its urgent perspective on the relationship between aesthetics and politics, and the sensitive and sensorial treatment of mourning at its core convinced me that the elegiac aesthetics of African cinema were not only worth investigating but essential to understanding contemporary African film.

In the course of researching and writing this dissertation, two major developments changed its shape and scope. First, I realized that what so many of these films shared was not just a preoccupation with mourning, but a faith in African cinema and its potential to respond to moments of catastrophic loss. They address postcolonial trauma, violence, memory, and political failure, but they also exhibit an optimism that is far-reaching, futuristic, even utopian in its vision of what African cinema can be and do. Redirecting my focus to African cinema as a *vision*, an abstract concept and an ideal, is what led me to the second major shift in the project. I began to understand that the shaping of African cinema through elegiac narrative was not the sole provenance of African filmmakers. Other filmmakers, Europeans and Americans among them, also had a vested interest in envisioning African cinema, in some cases, before African cinema

existed in actual fact. In order to tell the story of elegy's relationship to African cinema, I needed to look beyond the traditional boundaries of African film criticism, to two film genres which contributed to the development of African film: ethnographic and anticolonial avant-garde cinema.

Mourning the Living attempts to account for the prevalence of elegiac tropes in francophone African cinema. Considering films by African directors as well as those by non-African filmmakers who influenced and anticipated African cinema, this project looks comparatively at elegy and Africans on film from the earliest days of motion photography to the present day. Tracing elegy through the history of ethnographic film, the anti-colonial essay film, francophone African autobiographical film and the popular-art film hybrid, I argue that elegy provided a discourse for two overlapping movements. First, it served as the mode through which filmmakers defined the aesthetic and ideological goals of African cinema. Secondly, elegy permitted African cinema to narrate its own emergence and to assert its sense of belonging to a global history and discourse. In following these twin developments, I contend, we better understand Euro-American cinema's self-conscious expansion, however uneven and incomplete, into a global medium. Situating African cinema within this larger historical movement, this dissertation claims for it a key role in the consolidation of film genres and in the configuration of an elegiac aesthetic.

In pursuing points of relation between African and other film traditions, I am conscious of the instability of "African" cinema itself. As a field, African criticism is in the midst of a decades-long shift of what has long counted for African film. Initial development of African cinema was concentrated in francophone countries, largely due to France's role as the most readily available source of financial and technical assistance. For the first several decades of

African film criticism, African film meant francophone film, though anglophone and lusophone film existed to a much lesser degree. Despite a similar political and aesthetic vision, northern African cinema is often but not always excluded from the definition of African cinema (hence Roy Armes' need to name his 2006 book *African Filmmaking: North and South of the Sahara*). Given their distinct histories and institutions, Egyptian and South African cinema are generally not recognized under the heading of "African cinema" either. Finally, historically, "African film" has often excluded commercial films, genre films, and other films which did not fit the mold of the politically committed, didactic cinema that dominated the first few decades of African cinema.

It is this last criterion of exclusion that has generated the most critical attention over the last ten or so years. Many critics have emphasized the limitations of African cinema's dominant political and aesthetic discourse, which they charge with focusing almost exclusively on politically committed (*engagé)* or oppositional cinema. In a climate closely tied to the nationalist projects of the immediate post-independence era, early African film studies tended to overlook or deliberately exclude films inflected with popular genres, commercialism, or even stylistically unusual or avant-garde films.[1] In *Postcolonial African Cinema: Ten Directors* (2007), David Murphy and Patrick Williams write that "African filmmaking of the 1960s and 1970s was never solely limited to political or protest films made in a social realist or naturalistic style, as certain critical approaches might lead us to believe."[2] Kenneth Harrow's *Postcolonial African Cinema: From Political Engagement to Postmodernism* (2007) works to banish what he has called "the Specter of [Ousmane] Sembène," arguably the most dogmatic of the *engagé* African filmmakers,

[1] In Chapter 4, I discuss the powerful filmmakers' association La Fédération Panafricaine des Cinéastes (FEPACI) and its role as a gatekeeper for African cinema starting in 1969.
[2] David Murphy and Patrick Williams, *Postcolonial African Cinema: Ten Directors* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2007), 3.

by refocusing attention on formerly overlooked filmmakers like Djibril Diop Mambety, whose work did not conform to the Sembenian model. Similarly, Alexie Tcheuyap's *Postnationalist African Cinemas* (2011) urges critics to move away from the nationalist frameworks that structured works of African film criticism in the 1980s, arguing that "liberationist aesthetics and criticism... are no longer adequate to the task of analysing innovative productions and narrative experimentation."[3]

In breaking from this earlier model of African film, critics like Harrow, Murphy and Williams, and Tcheuyap invite us to understand African filmmaking after 1990 as, in part, a reaction to the committed cinema of an earlier generation. Now nearly thirty years old, this generational break is still referred to as the "New Wave" of African cinema, for the fact that it, like its earlier French counterpart, defined itself against an older generation of father figures. These filmmakers, most prominent among them Cameroonian filmmaker Jean-Pierre Bekolo, are unafraid to use experimental and commercial styles, are often globally (rather than nationally) oriented, and are vocal participants in African film criticism themselves.

African film criticism has expanded its purview to include an increasingly diverse array of genres, styles, and critical voices, but its most significant trend has been toward the inclusion of digital media. With the use of digital formats came the rise of Nollywood, the now-billion-dollar Nigerian movie industry which made abundantly clear the demand for African commercial offerings. Through the work of critics like Jonathan Haynes, Onookome Okome, Matthias Krings, and Brian Larkin, Nollywood and anglophone popular media have begun to attract the attention of African celluloid film critics,[4] despite Nollywood's very different funding structures, aesthetics, and audience. The contrast between video films and celluloid has only thrown into

[3] Alexie Tcheuyap, *Postnationalist African Cinemas* (New York: Manchester University Press 2011), 2.
[4] Popular movies in languages other than English (such as Wolof comedies or television dramas from Cote d'Ivoire) have yet to garner much critical attention.

relief just how few African celluloid films are regularly screened on the continent. Often derided as "FESPACO films," African celluloid films have virtually no audience outside of the international festival circuit. One can only hope that with the availability of digital equipment, streaming services, and the increasing sophistication of digital productions, Nollywood's success prefigures a more diverse, accessible African cinema to come.

In response to the increasing variety of African film and video offerings, many African film critics are reevaluating their critical models. Moving away from early attempts at comprehensive coverage (such as Paul Soumanou Vieyra's *Le cinéma Africain des origines à 1973* [1975]), auteur-based single filmmaker studies, (like Françoise Pfaff's early *The Cinema of Ousmane Sembene* [1984]), and overly broad critical paradigms (the "shooting back" model of the early aughts)[5], African criticism is becoming more specialized and more sensitive to stylistic and aesthetic concerns. Though widely adopted in the 1990s and 2000s, Manthia Diawara's thematic and stylistic categorizations of African cinema--"Return to the Sources," "Social Realist," and "Colonial Confrontation"[6]--have become less and less useful for contemporary cinema. More recent thematic and theoretical interventions, such as Lindiwe Dovey's *African Film and Literature: Adapting Violence to the Screen* (2009) and Kenneth Harrow's *Trash: African Cinema From Below* (2013) cut new and unexpected paths through African cinema's growing body of texts. Interdisciplinarity is increasingly common, as critics put film in conversation with literature and other social, political, historical, and economic texts. In his *Postcolonial Artists and Global Aesthetics*, Akin Adesokan looks at postcolonial essays, literature and film in an attempt to bridge the gap between the era of decolonization and the

[5] "Shooting back" criticism reads African films as subverting colonial discourse through appropriation of film language.
[6] Manthia Diawara, "African Cinema Today," *African Cinema: Politics and Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992) 140-166.

contemporary landscape of globalization and neoliberal capitalism. Similarly, Lindsey Green-Simms's *Postcolonial Automobility: Car Culture in West Africa* (2017) considers African film and video in the context of the history of motorization in West Africa, within a broader argument about modernity and technology in the region.

By situating African cinema within larger global historical moments and movements, African film critics are slowly bringing African cinema studies out of the scholarly isolation and disciplinary homelessness that has characterized much of its existence. In 2007, Murphy and Williams contended that

> a particular tendency within African film criticism has, quite understandably, cultivated a form of exceptionalism, which views and classifies African cinema in very different terms from those we might find in film studies more generally. As African cinema was the last world cinema to emerge to Africa's traumatic colonial history, there has often been a strong desire on the part of filmmakers and critics alike to view African cinema as separate from other forms of cinematic expression.[7]

This desire to see African film aesthetics as separate and autonomous seems to be changing, yielding to a recognition that African cinema has long played a role in transnational political and aesthetic currents. Integrating African cinema with film criticism more generally not only allows us to argue for the greater relevance of African cinema, but permits us to affirm the value of African film apart from its status as a reflection of local, national, or regional culture, particularly when, at present, African celluloid films have virtually no audience on the continent. While we might as critics or viewers express a commitment to making film accessible to all audiences, whether that be in rural Senegal or rural parts of the United States, this position does not prevent us from also asserting the value of African film regardless of its status or impact in any particular community.

[7] Murphy and Williams, *Postcolonial African Cinema,* 19.

Following these movements within contemporary African film criticism, this dissertation works to expand the purview of African film criticism by thinking comparatively about the historical evolution of African cinema and the role that elegy has played in its representation. At the same time, my examination cannot constitute an exhaustive history of elegy and African cinema. Elegy, understood broadly as a mood rather than a strict set of genetic traits, is an inclusive designation that one could potentially extend to a considerable group of texts. The selections I have made are necessarily particular, with a strong emphasis on the francophone art film tradition. What I have focused on here are moments of recalibration in the concept of African film, historical periods where the development of film genres, concepts, and styles coincided with and contributed to the emergence of new possibilities for the medium in Africa. Many of the films considered in this study are short films, avant-garde films, first films by young directors, and ethnographic films, and cannot be taken as representative of the vastly heterogenous group of films that are produced in many genres, formats, and languages on the continent and in African diasporic communities today.

The first chapter, "The Sensitive Camera: Elegy, Popular Ethnography, and the Affective Encounter," examines representations of affective encounters between ethnographers and their subjects in popular ethnographic media. I trace the history of film as an affective technology of empire and investigate elegy's role in constructing and promoting a narrative of intimacy between ethnographer and subject. Divided into three main sections, this chapter begins with early French physical anthropology, at the origins of the relationship between colonialism, cinema, and elegy. I argue that it was the mediatization of empire that gave power and persistence to the trope of elegy, a trope I follow through popular depictions of the American frontier, texts about French institutional anthropology in the 1930s, and in popular humanist

ethnography of the postwar era. In the second section, I follow the affective encounter into the second half of the 20th century, considering how Jean Rouch and John Marshall repurpose elegy and the ethnographic relationship over the course of their careers. I contend that they attempt to harness the utopian "sensitivity" of the camera to re-empower the Dogon and the Ju/'hoansi[8] respectively, with little success. Finally, I look at the ethno-tourism industry which sustains the Dogon and the Ju/'hoansi today in order to understand the enduring and destructive power of elegy and the affective encounter.

The second chapter, "To Stare With Equality: Africa, Elegy, and the Essay Film," looks at the development of the global essay film during the early decades of colonial independence. I argue that the trope of elegy allowed film essayists to conflate the political viability of the newly independent African state with the viability of film and the avant-garde. By using the idea of Africa as a testing ground for essayistic concepts, particularly the idea of dialogism on film, film essayists were able to reinforce their aesthetic legacy by projecting it onto an African filmmaker to come. By displacing onto Africa their anxieties about the longevity of avant-garde cinema, the global essay film envisioned a future where African filmmakers would take up the ideals of the avant-garde and secure its legacy. However, in championing an exclusively avant-garde African cinema, I argue, European film essayists cast themselves as the conservators of cinema's aesthetic ideals, with postcolonial filmmakers as its humble inheritors.

By the time African filmmakers adopt elegiac tropes in the 1980s and 1990s, elegy has begun to function more explicitly as a metalanguage, a vocabulary which can invoke the terms of African cinematic discourse and its history as a concept. The third chapter, "Second Nature: Elegy and Autobiography in African Film," considers autobiography in francophone African film. Each made by a young filmmaker working on their first full-length film, the films discussed

[8] The Ju/'hoansi would later begin to refer to themselves as the San.

in this chapter are among the first examples of West African autobiographical film. These films follow a similar template: a male protagonist returns home to West Africa from Europe after the death of a parent. I argue that these films return to the trope of the "*retour au pays natal*" as a self-conscious tautology, as a means of commenting on earlier literary constructions of African selfhood. In doing so, I argue that they translate the crisis of postcolonial subjectivity into an artistic and cinematic problem, a problem of representing the self on film. The "second nature" of these films is no longer primarily the alienated self, but the artistic, textual and filmic self. Rather than using elegy to mourn a lost self, these films repurpose elegy to explore new temporalities and new cooperative forms of authorship, putting the identitarian themes of Negritude into conversation with francophone African cinema's Marxist and feminist roots.

The fourth and final chapter, "Morbid Symptoms: Revolution and the Arts of Dying in Contemporary African Cinema," addresses an emerging aesthetic in contemporary francophone African film that juxtaposes death with youth, sensuality, and corporeality. I argue that these films attempt to deal with the fatalism of the current political moment, at the same time they initiate the opening up of francophone African film to popular global genres. Like the *ars moriendi* associated with the Black Death, I argue that these contemporary arts of dying aim to dull our fear of the unknown, not in order to reconcile us with death, but to urge us to use the power of sensation, imagination, and creativity to build the utopian dreams of the future in the present.

In seeking to interpret elegy's relationship to African cinema as an existing practice and as an evolving historical concept and ideal, this dissertation attempts to understand not just what African cinema is, but what it might have been and might still be. African cinema continues to

grapple with visions of itself both old and new, and the object of our study-- the moving image-- never settles.

Chapter 1

The Sensitive Camera: Elegy, Popular Ethnography, and the Affective Encounter

Though French ethnographer Marcel Griaule passed away in February of 1956, in April later that year he could be seen at his writing desk in Sanga in the French Sudan, where he appeared to be observing the funerary rites taking place around him [Figure 1]. In fact, the figure at the desk was only a mannequin made to look like Griaule, whose real body had been buried in Paris. Since Griaule had spent much of his life studying the Dogon and their elaborate funerary rites, it was only fitting that he had finally become the subject of one. Griaule's Dogon funeral was attended by academics, journalists, and a filmmaker, and was featured in a photo-essay in *Life Magazine*. On the first page of the photo-essay is a portrait of Griaule in his suit and tie; next to it is a picture of his mannequin at Sanga, covered in the skin of a sacrificial ram and carried by two Dogon pallbearers [Figure 2].[9] *Life*'s brief summary reports that the Dogon, described as having only recently ceased their practice of slaughtering human beings for sacrifice, were so emotional at the news of Griaule's death that they had "naively hoped Griaule's body would be exhumed in Paris and sent to Africa."[10] When this proved to be impossible, *Life* notes, the Dogon fashioned a mannequin to receive Griaule's rites. The rest of *Life*'s photographs document the number and scope of the rituals: the animals sacrificed, a mock battle in Griaule's honor, the homages and farewells, suggesting that, even in the absence of the celebrated scientist, the Dogon were still "uninhibitedly devoted to the memory of a beloved friend."[11]

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[9] "African Tribal Tribute to a Great Ethnologist," *Life,* December 3, 1956, 111-116.
[10] Ibid., 111.
[11] Ibid.

Figure 1

Figure 2

By the time of his death, Griaule (b. 1896) had cultivated a considerable public profile. From 1931 to 1933 he led the landmark Dakar-Djibouti expedition, an undertaking which would fortify the collections of Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro (later the Musée de l'Homme) with the rare artifacts and film footage that would fuel its popularity at the end of the 1930s. However it was Griaule's *Dieu d'eau: Entretien avec Ogotemmêli* (1948) --the story of his initiation into Dogon cosmological beliefs--that cast him as the trusted confidante of the Dogon and made him internationally famous. *Life*'s dual portrait of Griaule reflects his role as both a scholar and honorary Dogon: the professional headshot showing the distinguished scholar buried in Paris, and his double, covered in ram's skin and deposited in an ossuary in the Bandiagara

Cliffs. Yet the visibility of the French flag [Figures 3 and 4] throughout the Dogon burial suggest that the relationship celebrated here concerns more than Griaule and the Dogon. At a time when France was fighting a bloody war in Algeria, when bids for independence in the colonies were gaining traction and international attention, the apparent devotion to Griaule by the Dogon might appear to offer a rebuttal, a sign that such conflicts did not reflect the true sentiment between the colonized and the colonizer.

Figures 3 (*Life* Magazine) and 4 (Di Dio Film)

The media coverage of Marcel Griaule's Dogon funeral reflects a market for stories about the colonized that had been growing since the beginning of the twentieth century. Mass printed postcards photographs, advertisements, magazines, and moving pictures relied on romantic tropes of the primitive to communicate simple and broadly accessible narratives about their subjects.[12] Robert Flaherty's wildly popular and much-imitated *Nanook of the North* (1922) perfected the romantic formula--a naive subject locked in a struggle with nature until his poignant death, while others, as in *Life*'s depiction of the Dogon, emphasized Gothic themes of ritual, danger, and dislocation from the modern world. How should we understand the revival of these Romantic tropes in popular ethnographies at the end of Western colonial empire? As they did in the 18th century, elegy's waves of sentiment carry with them assurances about the

[12] Patricia Goldsworthy, "Images, Ideologies, and Commodities: the French Colonial Postcard Industry in Morocco," *Early Popular Visual Culture* 8 no. 2 (May 2010): 147-167.

inevitability of modernity and who its masters will be. Yet if we can conceive of Romantic elegy as a kind of affective technology, a mode that calibrated the reception of modernity as an irrevocable historical process, in the 20th century it was yoked to a new technology developed in the service of colonial scientific experimentation and surveillance: film.

In this chapter, I argue that popular ethnographic elegy has long managed Western audiences' affective encounters with the ethnographic subject on a mass scale, and that its history as a tool of colonial and imperial power hinders attempts to reconfigure it as anti-colonial critique. In the first section, I consider the umbrella category of ethnographic film and its relationship to elegy and the affective encounter, tracing its genealogy through early French physical anthropology, entrepreneurial "photographer-adventurers" of the American frontier, French institutional anthropology in the 1930s, and the humanist popular ethnography of the postwar era. In the second and third sections, I focus on two ethnographic filmmakers whose careers spanned the latter half of the twentieth century and whose films were produced out of longstanding relationships with their subjects: Jean Rouch (1917-2004) and John Marshall (1932-2005). Like Griaule, Rouch and Marshall each produced popular narratives and scholarly ethnographies of African subjects. Over the course of their careers, their works have both reflected and reflected on a legacy of popular ethnographic film and the affective power of elegiac narrative. I show that Rouch and Marshall, like many of their forerunners in popular ethnography, ultimately place their faith in the technical sensitivity of the camera and the possibilities of the cinematic archive, a strategy that fails to fundamentally alter ethnographic elegy's role as a vehicle of consolation rather than confrontation or political transformation. In the concluding section of this chapter, I address the relationship between popular ethnographic film and ethno-tourism in Africa and its significance for African film today.

At first glance, the grounds for comparison between Jean Rouch and John Marshall appear limited. Rouch was born twenty years prior to Marshall and trained in the French school of anthropology, while Marshall received more limited formal instruction in anthropology in the United States.[13] Stylistically, Rouch is considered one of the first practitioners of cinéma vérité, whereas Marshall is most often associated with Direct Cinema, along with filmmakers like Richard Leacock and Frederick Wiseman, for whom Marshall worked. The sites where Rouch and Marshall filmed--Rouch in the Niger River Basin and Marshall near what is now Namibia's border with South Africa--are separated by thousands of miles, and from the perspective of African cinema, Marshall is hardly known by name at all. Rouch, on the other hand, not only played a direct role in training and funding young West African filmmakers,[14] but has been a frequent object of praise and criticism as the figurehead of French ethnographic film in Africa.[15]

However, these differences are not as stark as they first appear. Since Rouch's career was delayed by World War II and Marshall's accelerated by his unusual family background, their careers roughly overlapped: Marshall began shooting *The Hunters* in 1952, just five years after Rouch's first film was released.[16] Like Griaule, Rouch and Marshall walked both sides of the popular/academic divide over their long careers, and their popular and scholarly works are not

[13] Rouch earned a doctorate in ethnology at the Sorbonne under Griaule, and Marshall a master's degree in anthropology at Yale. Marshall began but did not complete a Ph.D. in anthropology at Harvard.

[14] Jean Rouch was a founder of the Ethnographic Film Committee (*Comité international du film ethnographique*) at the Musée de l'Homme, and was responsible for funding early African films like *Afrique sur Seine*. He also mentored a number of prominent filmmakers and actors such as Safi Faye, Oumarou Ganda, Moustapha Alassane, and Damouré Zika.

[15] The most well-known example comes from a dialogue between Ousmane Sembene and Jean Rouch in 1965, in which Sembene speaks approvingly of *I, A Negro* but accuses Rouch of filming Africans as if they were "insects." Other prominent examples of African filmmakers and critics who have criticized Rouch include Teshome Gabriel and Manthia Diawara. Albert Cervoni, "A Historical Confrontation in 1965 between Jean Rouch and Ousmane Sembène: 'You Look at Us as If We Were Insects," in *Ousmane Sembène: Interviews*, ed. by Annett Busch and Max Annas (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2008), 3-6. Gabriel, *Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetics of Liberation* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982), 74-77. *Rouch in Reverse*, directed by Manthia Diawara, 1995 (San Francisco: California Newsreel, 1995), VHS.

[16] Rouch and Marshall even passed away within fifteen months of each other: Rouch in February of 2004 and Marshall in April of the following year.

always easily distinguishable. Though each received varying degrees of formal training in anthropology, both produced their earliest ethnographic studies prior to it, and asserted their independence from it throughout their careers. Like Flaherty, they styled themselves as amateur-adventurers, though they were at times ambivalent inheritors of Flaherty's legacy. Both had, at one point or another in their careers, ambiguous relationships to anti-colonial politics, and though Rouch was associated with vérité and Marshall with Direct Cinema, their mature styles might even be said to resemble more closely the other's signature style.[17] Most importantly, even though Marshall has a lower profile among African filmmakers and critics, his work marries Rouchian popular ethnography to a history of private investment and development in Africa. Enmeshed in the networks between international capital, humanitarianism, and tourism, Marshall's films profoundly shaped the market in which African films are consumed today.

Yet what really unites Rouch and Marshall is the way they built and marketed their relationships with their subjects. As documents of the filmmaker/subject relationship and its popular appeal, their films demonstrate elegy's centrality as a cultural text and its embeddedness in the rituals of marketing and mass storytelling. In their attempts to reconfigure elegy and the affective encounter to subvert hegemonic cultural texts, Rouch and Marshall show us the failures out of which African filmmakers will improvise different affective politics.

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Media, Affect, and Ethnography: A Short History

Ethnographic film's historical relationship to popular media is complex, and though it is closely associated with the discipline of anthropology, ethnographic film is typically identified by its subject rather than by a methodology or institutional relationship. What follows is a brief

[17] Here and throughout the chapter I rely on Bill Nichols' generalized terms and definitions for "observational" (Direct Cinema) and "participatory" (cinéma vérité) documentary. "How Can We Describe the Observational, Participatory, Reflexive, and Performative Modes of Documentary Film?" *Introduction to Documentary*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 172-194.

history of popular ethnography through the lens of four key media events that span roughly the first half of the 20th century: the 1895 Ethnographic Exhibition in Paris, the release of Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* in 1922, the 1931-1933 Dakar-Djibouti Mission (and Michel Leiris' account of it in *L'afrique fantôme)*, and the traveling photography exhibition entitled "The Family of Man," which opened at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1955. Each of these events represents a critical juncture in the history of ethnographic film as it relates to colonialism and imperialism, entertainment, affect, and technology, and illustrates how the relationship between ethnographer and subject came to be a popular theme.

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1895 - Motion Photography: Disciplining Science and the Body

The history of ethnographic film is often said to begin in 1895 with a series of chronophotographs recorded by the French physician Félix-Louis Regnault (1863-1938) during a live ethnographic exhibition held in Paris.[18] The subjects of the exhibition, 350 West African men and women, were displayed on a set designed to look like a "native village," giving visiting crowds the chance to glimpse the subjects as if *in situ*.[19] Starting in 1877, exhibitions like that of 1895 facilitated popular access to the spoils of colonial rule: exotic objects, animals, people, and in this case, an artificial landscape, an idyllic vision of the colonies in the heart of Paris.[20] Yet, as Regnault's presence suggests, the 1895 exhibition was more than colonial spectacle. Members from the Société d'Anthropologie de Paris came to take head and body measurements of the subjects which were later published in a scholarly journal as part of a collection documenting

[18] Rouch himself cited Regnault's photographs as the beginning of ethnographic film. See Peter Bloom's note on Regnault as a progenitor figure in early visual anthropology. Peter J. Bloom, *French Colonial Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008) 246, note 12.
[19] Rony, Fatimah Tobing, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 36-37.
[20] Bloom, *French Colonial Documentary*, 153-154.

racial types, and Regnault's innovation was to measure motion, using the newly developed chronophotographic technique to record subjects' movements on a light-sensitive disk.[21]

Regnault's interest in motion was rooted in a concern that man's movements had lost their robustness and efficiency in the adjustment to modern life. By precisely observing and recording so-called primitive subjects' movements, Regault aspired to develop exercises to restore them in modern subjects. The most famous image from Regnault's collection was that of a Wolof potter, whose technique did not require the use of a wheel. For Regnault, concerned with improving both the general health of French citizens and optimizing the French military, the Wolof potter's gestures represented a window into a pre-technological past which could be fused with early motion picture technology to restore strength and virility to the civilized.[22]

As Peter Bloom has pointed out, 19th century French physical anthropology's preoccupation with "primitive" motion was essentially Rousseauvian, based on a Romantic concept of a "natural man" whose physical characteristics had been deformed under the conditions of modern civilization. If Romanticism's nostalgia for a premodern idyll presumed the irretrievable loss of its object of desire, early French physical anthropologists posited that premodern traits might be reinstated, re-engineered with modern technology. What Thomas Pfau has called Romanticism's "mourning of ideality"[23] was translated into an empirical project of recuperation by 19th century pragmatists, who replaced the moral overtones of Romantic mourning for the premodern with a utopian faith in progress' ability to access its remnants.

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[21] Ibid., 154; 162.

[22] Rony, *The Third Eye,* 54-61.

[23] Though the concept of loss in Romanticism cannot be addressed in its complexity here, Pfau discussed two famous examples. In "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," Thomas Gray's famous line mourning "mute, inglorious Miltons" Pfau argues that he "identifies not an individual or ideal entity that actually existed; rather, it imagines a life that *should* have been..." [emphasis in the original]. Pfau also notes that Schiller describes the desire for the "naive" or "primitive" as aporetic, "a 'longing' (*Sehnsucht*) for a past plenitude that ultimately proves not only unattainable but not even desirable." Qtd. in Thomas Pfau, "Mourning Modernity: Classical Antiquity, Romantic Theory, and Elegiac Form," *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy*, Karen Weisman, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 553-555.

The development of serial motion photography proved a crucial technology for measuring and magnifying the physiological processes that scientists hoped to optimize. Fascinated with Eadweard Muybridge's technique of breaking down movement into photographic frames, Regnault studied with chronophotographer Étienne-Jules Marey and applied himself to capturing images of anatomy in motion.[24] With the advent of film proper, Regnault saw an opportunity to professionalize the nascent practice of ethnographic motion studies. Rony credits Regnault with being "one of the first to envision an ever-growing archive of ethnographic images."[25] Rather than continue to collect rare specimen of "vanishing races," Regnault argued, field researchers could record footage of subjects *in situ* that could be transported back to the metropole for analysis. What concerned Regnault was not only efficiency and accuracy, but the minimization of human contact, what Regnault called the "personal factor":

> [Film] decomposes [movement] into a series of images which can be examined at one's leisure by slowing the movement down however one wants, stopping as needed. This way, the personal factor is eliminated, whereas movement, as soon as it is completed, cannot otherwise be recalled except by memory.[26]

Regnault envisioned film as a tool for correcting the human imperfections of the eye, memory, and, by extension, language. By minimizing contact with the ethnographic subject, film would do away with the sources of error which threatened to delegitimize ethnography.

As a research tool, Regnault believed film would professionalize human sciences on all fronts. Eliminating the need for subjective, descriptive labor, it would provide data that could be studied under scientific conditions, and would keep the human subjects at a suitable distance

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[24] Rony defines chronophotography as "a form of proto-cinema which used cameras with oscillating shutters, so that precise intervals of movement could be distributed over one fixed plate." Rony, *The Third Eye,* 23.
[25] Ibid., 48.
[26] Félix Regnault, "L'histoire du cinéma: son rôle en anthropologie," *Société d'anthropologie* 3, no. 1 (1922): 64. Translation my own.

from their scientific observers.[27] By severing the collection of data (the filming of subjects) from its analysis, film was to maintain a division of labor between researcher and traveler or field researcher, restricting the filming and the "personal factor" to the field and reserving the data analysis for scientists back at their institutions.

* * *

1922 - Taking Ethnography to the Movies

Regnault expected film to sharpen the distinction between ethnographic research and sentimental travel stories, but much like the "photographer-adventurers" who had documented Native American life in the American Southwest and along the western frontier, non-specialist travelers had begun to use motion-picture cameras to document the subjects they encountered. Robert Flaherty (1884-1951), a former prospector and miner in Ontario with a Bell and Howard camera, could not have been further from Regnault's ideal of a researcher. Lacking scholarly affiliations or qualifications, Flaherty had brought a camera only at the request of his employer at the time, a railroad company, in order to establish the company's claim to land, but Flaherty was inspired to make a film. He arranged to have a project about the Inuit sponsored by the French fur company Revillon Frères, who intended it as promotional material for their company,[28] but the runaway success of the film, *Nanook of the North* and its enduring fame has ensured Flaherty's name has long outlasted that of its original sponsor.

What made *Nanook* a major departure from other ethnographic films of the time was its engagement with its Inuit subjects. The film opens with intertitles written from Flaherty's perspective, explaining that during the many months he spent in northern Ontario he met "with only two or three Eskimos as my companions," before he hit on the idea of telling the story of

[27] Rony, *The Third Eye*, 29.
[28] Ibid., 110.

the Inuit through a single character, the man who would become known as Nanook. Yet Flaherty went even further, involving Nanook and his family in the creative process. Flaherty's intertitles explain that he filmed a family of Inuit and then showed them his rushes, "so my character and his family could understand and appreciate" what he was doing. "As soon as I showed them some of the first results, Nanook and his crowd were completely won over," he reports. In fact, Flaherty tells us in an intertitle, Nanook and his family enjoyed the project so much that when it was over, "[p]oor old Nanook hung around my cabin talking over films we could still make if I would only stay on for another year." Flaherty's relationship with Nanook becomes the frame for the film's display of Inuit customs. Rather than merely observing fragments of Inuit hunting and igloo-building, we are invited to adopt Flaherty's perspective and befriend Nanook as well, accompanying him as he hunts for seal, builds an igloo and goes about his daily struggle to keep his family fed and safe.

By focusing on the human aspects of their relationship, Flaherty takes full advantage of the power of romantic ethnography, at the same time that he omits the European and American commercial interests that had been transforming the landscape of Ontario for more than a century. Despite being sponsored by a major company, *Nanook* shows almost no sign of European commercial expansion into Ontario in the film. As in *Life'*s depiction of the Dogon, the Inuit in *Nanook* appear unfamiliar with the world beyond traditional Inuit life. In one scene, Nanook is introduced to a gramophone record by a hunter, but instead of recognizing it, Nanook tries to eat it, a suggestion at once of the Inuits' remoteness, but also of their struggle to find food [Figure 5]. The gramophone scene is made poignant by the circumstances of Nanook's death, which Flaherty announces in the opening intertitles. Nanook died of starvation after the shooting, Flaherty tells us, but says that by showing the image of this "kindly, brave, simple Eskimo" in

"most of the odd corners of the world" *Nanook of the North* becomes a tribute to its dead protagonist. As an allegory about modern recording technology, *Nanook* suggests that Flaherty's camera is unable to save Nanook from starvation, though his film can at least honor him.

Figure 5

Yet by attributing Allakariallak's death to starvation, Flaherty obscures what was likely the real cause of Nanook's death. By the early 20th century, the Inuit community was well integrated into European and American commercial ventures, and had begun to die of a disease closely associated with urban poverty. As we know from filmmaker Claude Massot, who returned to Ontario to interview relatives of the participants in *Nanook*, not only was "Nanook's" name actually Allakariallak, it was tuberculosis that likely killed him, not starvation. Flaherty's elegy for "Nanook," rather than Allakariallak, is a classic example of the salvage paradigm,[29] a term James Clifford has used to refer to the attempt to preserve or restore a disappearing cultural practice presumed to be rendered inauthentic by change.[30] To be a proper ethnographic subject, according to the logic of the salvage paradigm, Nanook had to live in the past and die in the past, not from a disease that was already killing the poorest residents of the cities where *Nanook* was screened. Yet the salvage paradigm also offers an opportunity, a chance to "save" Nanook

[29] The concept of the "salvage paradigm" is related but not to be confused with "salvage ethnography," the early 20th century school of anthropology associated with Franz Boas concerned with recording disappearing cultural practices.

[30] James Clifford, "The Others: Beyond the 'Salvage' Paradigm," *Third Text* 3 no.6 (1989): 73-78.

allegorically. Clifford argues that, "[e]thnography's disappearing object is...in a significant degree, a rhetorical construct legitimating a representational practice...The other is lost, in disintegrating time and space, but saved in the text."[31] Flaherty not only casts his preservation of "Nanook" as a redemptive act, he bypasses the life and death of Allakariallak entirely.

By marketing Nanook as the "melancholy spirit of the North," Flaherty commodifies even the collateral damage of European commercial expansion, perfecting a narrative formula that transforms the native's appearance and disappearance on screen into a profitable mix of poignancy, pleasure, and publicity. Unlike the ethnographic subjects that preceded him, Nanook became a character in the popular imagination, though always a celebrity in absentia. *Nanook*'s main character was never intended to survive to join the crowds that saw the film: the film does not anticipate an audience that would ever include its ethnographic subjects. The elapsed time between the shooting and the screening made *Nanook* poignant, but the staging of his death as a *fait accompli* ensured it would also be entertaining. Massot contests Flaherty's claim that the Inuit had no understanding of cinema, reporting that the Inuit had been actively involved in many different aspects of the filming, from set design to camera operation,[32] but Flaherty's notion of introducing a "naive" subject to film for the first time became a powerful marketing gimmick.

A tradition of ethnographic adventure films followed in Flaherty's footsteps, one which included his own films like *Moana* (1926), *Tabu* (directed along with F.W. Murnau) (1931), *Man of Aran* (1934) and *Louisiana Story* (1948), as well as films like Cooper and Schoedsack's *Grass: A Nation's Battle for Life* (1925) and *Chang: A Drama of the Wilderness* (1927). His influence in France can be seen in films like *Chez les mangeurs d'hommes (1928)* but also to a certain extent in the popular films of ethnographers like Marcel Griaule. Though of very

[31] Clifford, "On Ethnographic Allegory," *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, eds. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 112.
[32] Peter J. Bloom, *French Colonial Documentary*, 110-114.

different traditions, the opposing legacies of Robert Flaherty and Félix-Louis Regnault can be said to represent the conflicted parentage of visual ethnography, as David McDougall argues:

> The work of Regnault and Flaherty defines alternative tendencies in ethnographic film that have persisted to the present day. For those working in the tradition of Regnault the camera has been regarded primarily as an instrument for gathering cultural data. The process of analyzing the data has remained largely external to the footage itself. For Flaherty and his followers, film has not only provided a means of recording human behavior but also of leading the viewer through its intricacies according to some system of communicative logic.[33]

If in McDougall's schema, Regnault's camera is associated with the preservation of behaviors, gestures, and bodies to prepare them for subsequent analysis, for Flaherty, the encounter itself is the decisive moment. For Flaherty, it is proximity with the human subject that drives the ethnographic film; for Regnault, the subject only makes sense as a fragment in a larger matrix, the significance of which can only be revealed in time. Though both Regnault's and Flaherty's sensibilities can both be identified in the popular ethnographic film to follow them, Flaherty's vision of popular film driven by the human encounter would be far more broadly influential, while Regnault's techno-utopian ambitions were to survive in other forms.

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1933 - Pleasure, Possession, and the Ethnographic Institution

In the mid-1920s in France, anthropology was emerging as an institutionalized academic discipline, the product of debates taking place since the end of the 19th century about the "human sciences."[34] A concept that attempted to reconcile the opposing tendencies at the heart of ethnographic practice (not unlike those which separated Flaherty's "communicative" model from Regnault's typologies), the human sciences, according to Vincent Debaene, aimed "to isolate

[33] David MacDougall, "Ethnographic Film: Failure and Promise," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 7 (1978): 407.
[34] Vincent Debaene, *Far Afield: French Anthropology Between Science and Literature,* trans. Justin Izzo (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 25.

facts that speak for themselves and to create a style capable of restoring the properties of the object without betraying it."[35] Rather than see this project as stemming from their immediate forerunners in the 19th century, such as Regnault, proponents of anthropology as a human science "skip[ped] over the nineteenth century [to] find their ancestors in the Renaissance and the eighteenth century, in figures like Rousseau. Yet the Rousseau they embraced was not Rousseau the Romantic, but Rousseau the Enlightenment philosopher.[36] Anthropology of the early 20th century distanced itself from the Romantic idea that the human and sciences were incompatible,[37] but its nostalgia for Enlightenment philosophy betrayed, in Debaene's words, "a sense of loss of a pure and preserved alterity."[38]

By the mid-1920s, affect had slowly come to play a more important role as French anthropology attempted to reach a broader audience. During the interwar period, French anthropology "had to establish itself just as the age of mass society was taking hold,"[39] when public demand for compelling ethnographic stories was being met by non-specialists like Flaherty. Debaene writes that French ethnographers trained under Marcel Mauss in the 1920s and 1930s began the practice of writing, in addition to a scholarly text, a version intended to appeal to the general public, one which explored the more literary aspects of the ethnographic encounter.[40] Debaene writes that these "second books" had a dual purpose:

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[35] Ibid., 69.
[36] Ibid., 114.
[37] Debaene cites François-René de Chateaubriand (1768-1848) as an example: "'In the hands of man,' Chateaubriand wrote, 'science dries up the heart, disenchants nature, leads weak minds to atheism and from atheism to every crime; whereas the beaux-arts make our days marvelous, sensitize our souls, fill us with faith in the Divinity, and lead from religion to the practice of all the virtues.'" Qtd. In Debaene, *Far Afield*, 112.
[38] Ibid., 117.
[39] Debaene mentions examples like Griaule's *Les Flambeurs d'hommes* (1934), Michel Leiris' *L'Afrique fantôme* (1934), Jacques Soustelle's *Mexique, terre indienne* (1936), Paul-Emile Victor's *Boréal et Banquise* (1938-39), Alfred Métraux's *L'Île de Pâques* (1941). Ibid., 4.
[40] Debaene makes the counterintuitive argument that though these secondary popular texts were ostensibly written to make ethnographic research more accessible to the public, they arose instead from a need to make use of rhetoric, which was discouraged in scholarly ethnographic monographs. "[H]ow can we accept the need to communicate a

> On the one hand… they sought to correct the errors and prejudices spread by the mass media and, to that end, conceived of anthropology as an ultimately edifying discipline. On the other hand, though, they led a promotional campaign for anthropology that was based on the wide dissemination of information about the types of work ethnographers were doing and the results of their research and on the transformation of these elements into media-friendly spectacles.[41]

The practice of publishing a popular book in addition to the scientific monograph represented an important part of French anthropology's relationship to the general public. By the late 1930s, with the opening of the Musée de l'Homme, the museum would become the site of "a veritable flurry of pedagogical activism," with lectures, screenings and a massive collection of artifacts.[42]

But the event which inaugurated and arguably enabled this period of popular expansion for French anthropology was the highly publicized Dakar-Djibouti Expedition of 1931-1933. Sponsored by the Musée d'Ethnographie and the Institut d'Ethnologie at the University of Paris, the expedition was led by Marcel Griaule, who spearheaded the collection of "some 3,500 objects"[43] which would later be "a means of renewing the ethnographic collection" back home.[44] Though conceived as a way to swell the museum's collections,[45] the Expedition would also serve as an opportunity for one of its team members, the surrealist writer Michel Leiris, to produce a popular, literary account of the Expedition in the form of a diary, titled *L'Afrique fantôme* (1934).

An extended reflection on the relationship between affect and ethnography, *L'Afrique fantôme* takes as its theme the possibility of a transformative, personal encounter with the

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truth that must be felt so as not to be distorted, all without being suspected of producing literature? In short, we can do so in the name of the education of the masses." Ibid., 79.

[41] Ibid., 34.

[42] Ibid., 31.

[43] Bloom, *French Colonial Documentary*, 43.

[44] Debaene, *Far Afield*, 46.

[45] It was also aimed to help the French close the widening gap in field research between themselves and Great Britain. Ibid., 36.

ethnographic subject. In the preface, Leiris explains his objective: "I intended to break with the intellectual habits which had been mine until that moment, and, in contact with men of another culture and of another race, to knock down the partitions between which I was suffocating and expand my horizon to a truly human scale."[46] For Leiris, the expedition was an opportunity to transcend the alienation imposed by modern life, a perspective that, despite its difference in tone, was not unlike that of Regnault and other early physical anthropologists. The "primitive" for Leiris was a resource, a prosthetic for modern life, and the practice of ethnography less a question of discovery than of recovery of affective potency.

Leiris' descriptions of the landscapes and people he encounters borrow from Romantic sources like Gérald de Nerval's *Sylvie*, Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* and of course Rousseau, whose aspiration "to show...man in light of the whole truth of nature," provides *L'Afrique fantôme's* epigraph; yet the Rousseau of *The Confessions* was, in the 1920s and 1930s, also the Rousseau of the surrealists, the inspiration for André Breton's concept of automatic writing. Though Leiris had been hired by Griaule as a "secretary-archivist" with the simple task of recording the day-to-day activities of the expedition (Leiris was not a trained ethnographer), Leiris had understood his role as a creative one, a chance to apply Breton's notion of "chance objectivity" or *hasard objectif*. Chance objectivity considered minor details, chance occurrences, and meetings ("*rencontres")* as containing the potential for a kind of truth, the significance of which could only be revealed with time. Leiris argued that in "bringing subjectivity to its limit that we attain objectivity." For Leiris, this meant recording everything, from the trivial to the hyperpersonal--the oneiric, the scatological, the erotic--confessions which make clear that his desire for intimacy with African subjects was often explicitly sexual. By linking the scientific imperative to record with the moral imperative to confess, Leiris reimagines

[46] Michel, Leiris, *L'afrique fantôme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1934), 13. Trans. my own.

the ethnographic archive as Romantic and insists that the observer was as integral to the encounter as the ethnographic subject.[47]

Yet in *L'Afrique fantôme,* this practice of self-examination and self-incrimination does not hinder the violent objectives at the core of the expedition's mission. Charged with the task of bringing objects back to France for study and display, the members of the Dakar-Djibouti mission raid many of the villages in which they stop, in the presence of Leiris and often with his help. Leiris provides reports of Griaule rummaging among human remains, stuffing ritual objects under shirts and down trouser legs, and though Leiris confesses these acts--the shame and the excitement that his involvement triggers--the act of confession is soon followed by self-absolution. One striking example occurs on September 7, 1931, only a day after looting. Leiris describes his encounter with some "charming" Bobo-Wule in a nearby village: "Idyllic nudity, necklaces of straw or of cowrie shells, young men with prettily braided hair and women with shaved heads...it was more than was needed to charm me, to make me forget all thoughts of piracy and think of nothing more than the genre of Robinson Crusoe and Paul and Virginie."[48] Though faithfully archived by Leiris, the company's transgressions could always be forgotten in the seduction of the virgin territory ahead.

When Leiris ultimately declares the project of *L'Afrique fantôme* a failure, he does not blame the violence or hypocrisy of these raids, but ethnography's dispassion: "...ethnography could only deceive me: a human science remains a science and detached observation would not in itself bring about contact. Perhaps by definition, it implies the contrary: the attitude proper to

[47] I do not see Leiris' Surrealist influences as easily separable from his Romantic ones. Debaene notes that, "Leiris's primitivism turns out to be closer to Breton than to Bataille, and at times is even more romantic than Surrealist." Debaene, *Far Afield*, 192.
[48] Ibid., 105.

the observer being an impartial objectivity, enemy to effusiveness."[49] That Leiris could fault the expedition for its aloof detachment after his accounts of thrilling, sexualized violence, suggests that at the heart of his project of confession lies a fundamental self-deception. An infinite deferral of guilt lends *L'Afrique fantôme* its overarching structure, even down to the detail of Leiris' hope that the meaning of his text might be glimpsed by his reader at a later time. As we will see, Leiris' assertion that the archival record will provide its own justification in time becomes virtually axiomatic by the time it is inherited by filmmakers like Rouch and Marshall.

L'Afrique fantôme keeps the question of the archive's purpose in suspension, and Leiris would continue to revisit the question of the relationship between ethnography and colonialism throughout his career. Debaene credits him as one of the first French anthropologists to encourage his colleagues to confront the relationship between anthropology and colonial domination and exploitation in the 1950s, urging them to become "the natural advocates [for colonized societies] against the colonizing nation."[50] Debaene writes that Leiris' landmark essay, "The Anthropologist Confronted with Colonialism," signaled the "emergence of an entirely new type of questioning that seeks to discern and denounce connections between anthropological knowledge and colonial power."[51] Griaule, at the time one of the most important figures in French anthropology, was particularly vulnerable to Leiris' criticism and had already been made an unmistakable (if unnamed) target in Aimé Césaire's *Discours sur le colonialisme* (1950).[52]

For more conservative forces, the death of Griaule a few years later was an opportunity to shore up the threatened legacy of French anthropology and its first generation of professionals.

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[49] Ibid., 13.

[50] The original article was published in *Les Temps modernes* in August 1950 and reprinted later in *Cinq*. Debaene also notes that ethnography's ethical, internationalist shift in France was particularly strong due to the "all-important association between the Musée de l'Homme and the Resistance during the occupation." Debaene, *Far Afield*, 279.

[51] Ibid., 281.

[52] I pick up the anti-colonial critique of ethnography, particularly ethnographic film, in more detail in chapter 3. Debaene also notes Césaire's mention of Griaule. Ibid., 262.

One of the most notable homages to Griaule was that of Léopold Sédar Senghor, who, as a founder of Negritude alongside Aimé Césaire, provided a counterpoint to Césaire's critique. In his essay, Senghor cites Griaule's tremendous influence on Negritude and likens Griaule's *Dieu d'eau* to Plato's *Dialogues*.[53] As we have already seen in the example of the Dogon, the elegy for the ethnographer came at a time when French anthropology was being reshaped both from the outside and from within, and in this context can be seen as part of a defensive project that enlisted both the voices of the colonized and the arm of the popular media. Though the figure of Griaule polarized the changing landscape of French anthropology in the 1950s, we will see that Jean Rouch, whose career was just beginning in the 1950s, manages to reconcile them, both leading the movement to incorporating subjects' voices into ethnographic film and defending the legacy of the first generation of French anthropologists.

* * *

1955 - Empire as Family in the Postwar

In the United States, popular conceptions of ethnography during the postwar era were taking a different direction. Unlike the push for a more politicized ethnography in France, ethnography in the United States was popularly conceived as the way to neutralize global conflict, to celebrate universal humanity as a basis for cooperation and peace. Emblematic of this goal was the 1955 photography exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art: "The Family of Man." Intended to serve as "a mirror of the universal elements and emotions in the everydayness of life—as a mirror of the essential oneness of mankind throughout the world,"[54] the exhibition comprised 503 photographs of subjects from over the the world, including many Africans, captured in quotidian and generally picturesque settings. Edward Steichen, the curator, had

[53] De Ganay, Solange, ed. *Ethnologiques: Hommages à Marcel Griaule*. Paris: Hermann, 1987.
[54] Edward Steichen, "Introduction by Edward Steichen," *The Family of Man* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art; 2015), np.

designed the exhibition so that "love should be the dominant and key element... just as it is in the individual family." If Leiris was troubled by feelings of estrangement in *L'Afrique fantôme*, "The Family of Man" provided, as Allan Sekula would later put it, a ready-made "utopian family album,"[55] designed to produce the feeling that "I'm not a stranger here."[56]

To this end, the photographs were chosen to be generic, simple, and evocative. According to Steichen, they were "concerned with the religious rather than religions. With basic human consciousness rather than social consciousness," and claimed to exclude any "images that border on propaganda for or against any political ideologies."[57] Though he suppressed any reference to the political or historical contexts of the exhibition's subjects, Steichen was unequivocal about the geopolitical context of the exhibit itself. In the aftermath of World War II and the onset of the Cold War, signified in the exhibition by an enormous color image of a detonated hydrogen bomb, "The Family of Man" posited that a future of peace and democracy rested in large part on the affective power of the ethnographic encounter to mold humankind into a global family.

When the exhibition traveled to Paris the following year, Roland Barthes wrote that the absurd "myth of the human 'community'" was only "an alibi to a large part of our humanism."[58] Barthes argued that the exhibit's sentimentality was designed to obscure the historical forces that produced the subjects on display and sidestep any possibility of political redress. "Everything here," Barthes writes, "the content and appeal of the pictures, the discourse which justifies them, aims to suppress the determining weight of History; we are held back at the surface of an identity, prevented precisely by sentimentality from penetrating into the ulterior zone of human

[55] Allan Sekula, "The Traffic in Photography," *Art Journal* 41 no.1 (1981): 19.
[56] Carl Sandburg, "Prologue," *The Family of Man* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art; 2015), 3.
[57] "Museum of Modern Art Plans International Photography Exhibition," January 31, 1954, Museum of Modern Art, New York, https://www.moma.org/documents/moma_press-release_325966.pdf.
[58] Here, Barthes is treating "The Family of Man" as a cultural phenomenon; he is not yet making the direct critique of the social sciences that he would in the 1960s. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Richard Howard and Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 100.

behavior where historical alienation introduces some 'differences' which we shall here quite simply call 'injustices.'"[59]

Barthes' writings in the mid-1950s speak to the new role played by affective ethnography in the postwar conception of empire. Published first in the literary magazine *Les lettres nouvelles*, Barthes' essay on "The Family of Man" appeared a year later *Mythologies* (1957) alongside his famous essay on the image of a Senegalese *tirailleur* soldier in salute. The image of the black soldier [Figure 6], which appeared in *Paris-Match* only a year before Griaule's funeral ran in *Life*,[60] parallels that of Griaule's Dogon funeral in many ways. Like the Dogon who honor Griaule in front of the French flag, the black soldier, in Barthes' reading, is made to signify "that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors."[61] Barthes argues that the apparent filial gratitude of the colonized is generated as a kind of alibi. In its process of signification, "there is a place which is full and one which is empty, linked by a relation of negative identity ('I am not where you think I am, I am where you think I am not')." What Barthes calls "myth" papered over the paradoxes of the postwar vision of empire, that a subdued population could become happy children of a global community, that the patriarch who was feared could become the patriarch who is loved.

[59] Ibid., 101.
[60] The *Paris-Match* cover of the young black soldier in salute was published in July of 1955.
[61] Ibid., 225.

Figure 6

The "family" of man in the postwar is invariably governed by this Janus-faced father figure. Might we see Griaule, the father of two contradictory legacies, one brutal and one benevolent, as a symptom of the relationship Barthes describes between sentiment and postwar empire? Might we see Griaule's two funerals as facilitating a Barthesian alibi? Appearing in two places at once, a single body shared unequally between two graves, Griaule's paradoxical legacy could only be laid to rest by a double funeral.[62] So too does "The Family of Man," double its patriarchal figures. Father figures abound in the collection, holding spears and posing with their polygamous families, but only one patriarch can unite the global family of man. The photograph of the United Nations General Assembly that concludes the exhibition suggests that only a body

[62] The full citation reads: [T]he signification of the myth is constituted by a sort of constantly moving turnstile which presents alternately the meaning of the signifier and its form, a language object and a metalanguage, a purely signifying and a purely imagining consciousness. This alternation is, so to speak, gathered up in the concept, which uses it like an ambiguous signifier, at once intellective and imaginary, arbitrary and natural.…[T]he ubiquity of the signifier in myth exactly reproduces the physique of the alibi ...: in the alibi too, there is a place which is full and one which is empty, linked by a relation of negative identity ("1 am not where you think I am, I am where you think I am not")...[N]othing prevents [myth] from being a perpetual alibi: it is enough that its signifier has two sides for it always to have an "elsewhere" at its disposal. The meaning is always there to present the form; the form is always there to outdistance the meaning." Ibid., 233.

of international cooperation and benevolent empire can maintain the utopian social order imagined by Steichen's curation and husband the world into an era of global peace.

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Jean Rouch: Friend of the Mad Masters

Shaped in no small part by the relationship between film, affect, ethnography, and empire that developed over the course of the first half of the 20th century, Jean Rouch's long career would reflect the changing climate of French ethnography and popular media. At a moment when French ethnography was reckoning with its political responsibility to its subjects, Jean Rouch, I argue, interpreted this imperative modestly, as a personal ethics, practiced in the form of his "shared ethnography" and ethnofictions. Unlike his predecessors, Rouch gave his subjects a place in the modern world; yet too great an emphasis on Rouch's relatively small group of ethnofictions masks the narrowness of his vision. Paying particular attention to the paratext surrounding Rouch's films and his fashioning of a popular persona, I argue that Rouch commits himself more seriously to the unfinished affective projects of his predecessors than to his own shared ethnography, and that we should be wary of the fetishization of the "sensitive camera" and the glorification of ethnographic practice for its own sake.

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Early Career

The first cut of Rouch's first film, *Au pays des mages noirs,* shot with his friends Pierre Ponti and Jean Sauvy, was screened at the Musée de l'Homme for Marcel Griaule, Michel Leiris, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and André Leroy-Gourhan.[63] Speaking later of this moment in an interview, Rouch says that they were all pleased with the footage: "I was happy, because I'd won

[63] Andre Leroy-Gourhan was director of the Musée de l'Homme at the time, and Claude Levi-Strauss the deputy-director. Paul Henley, *The Adventure of the Real: Jean Rouch and the Craft of Ethnographic Cinema* (Chicago Scholarship Online: 2010), 41.

over the ethnologists."[64] Yet Rouch, in need of money, agreed to have it edited and distributed by the French newsreel company, Les Actualités Françaises. Having surrendered editorial control, Rouch was shocked when he barely recognized the finished feature, which had been larded with stock footage of exotic clichés and recut to follow a different narrative logic. In the interview, Rouch expresses regret that he could never show the finished version of *Au pays des mages noirs* to any of his friends: "[W]e [the three filmmakers] were furious. I was ashamed… because it was just the sort of thing that we had to fight against. I could never show that film to Damouré, to the Sorkos, to Nougou, to Bilagaoudel. It's a shame! I never dared to show [the Actualités Françaises version] to my friends at the Musée de l'Homme either."[65] At the same time, Rouch expresses admiration for the effect of the film: "And yet the film worked! People loved it!...I'd learned a lesson...always edit a film back-to-front and to put the dramatic climax at the end. It was a great lesson in film-making."[66]

This anecdote about Rouch's first film, a topic to which he often returned, illustrates the competing personal and professional loyalties that informed Rouch's filmmaking. Sensitive to the priorities of his ethnographic subjects as well as his mentors, Rouch tended to represent the principles by which he worked in terms of his relationships, each created--in Rouch's telling--through serendipitous and emotionally-charged encounters. Rouch's first attachment was to the popular cinema of Robert Flaherty, nurtured by his father, who had been on a polar expedition in 1912 and took Rouch to the cinema for the first time to see *Nanook of the North*.[67] As a young man, Rouch was deeply affected by the publicity surrounding Griaule's Dakar-Djibouti

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[64] *Jean Rouch: Premier Film, 1947-1991,* directed by Dominique Dubosc (1991; Watertown, MA: Documentary Educational Resources, 2005), http://search.alexanderstreet.com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/view/work/764832. See also Henley, *The Adventure of the Real,* 42.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid.
[67] *Rouch in Reverse*, directed by Manthia Diawara (1995; San Francisco: California Newsreel, 1995). VHS.

Expedition, a fascination which crystallized when he caught sight of an image from the expedition--a Dogon hunter's funeral--in a shop display window.[68]

Yet there is also Rouch's relationship with the camera, forged in a moment of tragedy. While Rouch was working as an engineer in French Niger during WWII, a lightning strike killed ten of the Nigerien laborers working on his project. In the rites of purification and possession that were administered following the deaths, Dongo, the Songhay god of thunder, speaking through an intermediary, determined that Rouch had "mapped his road onto one of 'Dongo's paths,'" and was therefore responsible for their deaths.[69] After sacrificing a black bull to atone for his offense, Rouch regretted that he could not describe the rituals he had seen, remarking that "it had to be filmed to be [understood].[70]" Yet in Rouch's dramatic telling, the beginning of his career as an ethnographic filmmaker was initiated when lightning improbably struck twice. A fisherman was killed, and this time Rouch had a camera ready to take photographs of the purification rites.[71] Shopworn in their retelling, Rouch's biographical anecdotes aspire to the realm of popular lore. If Flaherty revealed the dramatic potential of becoming a character in one's own film, Rouch perfected the art; if Leiris cleaved to the Surrealist conviction in the oracular power of the *rencontre*, Rouch seemed to live and breathe this revealed truth.

Though Rouch's stories about his career would later come to take on this fabled tone, his early films--following his embarrassing incident with the newsreel company--were sober in tone. Rouch shot the footage for *Au pays des mages noirs* and a number of other short films between

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[68] The photo was featured on the cover of the surrealist publication *Minotaure*. Henley, *The Adventure of the Real*, 19.

[69] Rouch explained: "Damouré Zika me traduisait ce que disaient Dongo et son frère, entrecoupés de hurlements terribles. Très simplement, j'étais le responsable, car j'avais tracé ma route sur un "chemin de Dongo." Jean Rouch, "L'autre et le sacré: jeu sacré, jeu politique," *Jean Rouch: Cinéma et Anthropologie*, ed. Jean -Paul Colleyn (Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma, 2009), 38.

[70] Rouch's full statement focuses on Damouré Zika's grandmother, who performed the ritual possession: "Comment étudier ce rituel, comment le décrire? Il faudrait Ie filmer pour essayer de comprendre comment se faisait la métamorphose inquiétante d'une vieille femme fatiguée en un dieu véhément..." Ibid.

[71] Ibid.

September 1948 and March 1949 on his first doctoral dissertation excursion. While traveling in Songhay territory along the borders between what is now Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, Rouch made a handful of short films during this expedition, the best known being *Les magiciens des Wanzerbé* (1948).[72] To avoid any appearance of narrative manipulation, the film opened with an intertitle including the caveat that the "camera served only as a pencil for recording what the hand could not. The observer has contented himself with filming everyday life scenes of a village of black magicians, without prompting a single one and without the temptation of the slightest bit of fakery."[73] During this time, Rouch was still relying primarily on trial and error in order to learn to use his camera, and his films were modest and primarily descriptive.[74]

Yet his second dissertation research project with Griaule in 1950 would strain Rouch's commitment to passive observation. Rouch and a fellow student of Griaule, Roger Rosfelder received a grant from IFAN (L'Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire) and CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique) which provided a newly-developed portable tape recorder for them to record original sound.[75] Griaule had proposed that Rouch and Rosfelder film and record everyday sounds and songs among the Dogon, but when a young Dogon man accidentally drowned, Rouch petitioned Griaule to focus on the funerary rites of this man they called only "the man from Ireli."[76] Yet, filming this young man's mourners, as Rouch would later relate in an interview, caused Rouch to question his role as an impartial observer. Rouch tells us that when it came time to film the mourners, he "hesitated to film the crying women" but "then,

[72] Henley, *The Adventure of the Real,* 43.
[73] *Les magiciens des Wanzerbé*, directed by Jean Rouch, (1948), Youtube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8wPLGeVrxaU.
[74] Henley, *The Adventure of the Real*, 35.
[75] Ibid., 50.
[76] Ibid., 52.

among those women, all of a sudden, I discovered the mother of the dead man...it was my first, deeply affecting and troubling [*bouleversant*] experience of funerary rituals in Dogon country."[77]

Unlike *Nanook*, in which Allakariallak's death was implied off-screen, the effect of watching the man from Ireli's mourners and his mother in particular, is distressing and immediate. Out of a group of singing and weeping women, an elderly woman appears, her hands outstretched, swaying subtly, looking up at the sky out beyond the camera [Figure 7]. Rouch incorporates a recording of her lament in the film (no doubt due to the need to record authentic audio with the portable recorder), along with his own voiceover translation into French. Yet her speech is marked so emphatically as feminine and maternal that the lament itself seems to confirm Rouch's sense of intrusion. She says (through Rouch's translation): "I have nothing to say to the world, my son is gone, hail, my son! It is time to awake and suckle at my breast, my breast is full of milk, it is time to suckle, go to that other world where God will quench your thirst." Rouch does little to contextualize the meaning of the mother's lament, and it is unclear whether Rouch means us to interpret it as a personal expression of grief or a formal recitation. Yet the unsettling effect of the mother's song is to bring the question of the viewer's empathy to the fore, as it did Rouch's. The mother is the object of the camera's gaze, and yet we know nothing about her, about her life or about her grief. Where Flaherty's narrative permitted identification and intimacy with Nanook, the man from Ireli's mother exists in a closed circuit of mourning.

[77] Jean Rouch and Enrico Fulchignoni in "Jean Rouch raconte les Siguis," *Jean Rouch: une aventure africaine* (Disc 3) (1980; Paris: Editions Montparnasse, 2010), DVD.

Figure 7

Rouch's solution to the indeterminate position of the viewer is to abandon his ethnographic subjects entirely and insert a formulaic elegy. His camera follows the body up to the elevated burial site in the cliffs into an ossuary filled with human remains [Figure 8], and we hear a second lamentation similar in tone to that of the mothers'. However, these words are not attributed to a subject, but appear to be Rouch's own:

> And up there, in the necropolis in the sky, the men are completing the walls of the tomb. The dead man has gone to meet his ancestors, whose clay huts still stand. These ancestors who, from above Ireli village, watch over, as they always have done, the birth of the rains, the birth of the torrents, and the birth of men.

Rouch translates the man from Ireli into a symbol: his death becomes an opportunity to reflect on the seasonal rhythms that structure life and death on the cliffs and to take comfort in the spiritual life of the Dogon that has sustained them in this eternal cycle. Rouch's final shot celebrates the tragic beauty of the treacherous cliffscape. Shooting from the top of the cliffs, he films a baobab blossom as it is slowly swept into the current, pulled down a waterfall and into a deep pool below, taking the same path as the drowned man [Figure 9]. Rouch admits to having planted the baobab flower himself as a way "to express what I had felt during that mysterious ceremony."[78]

[78] Ibid.

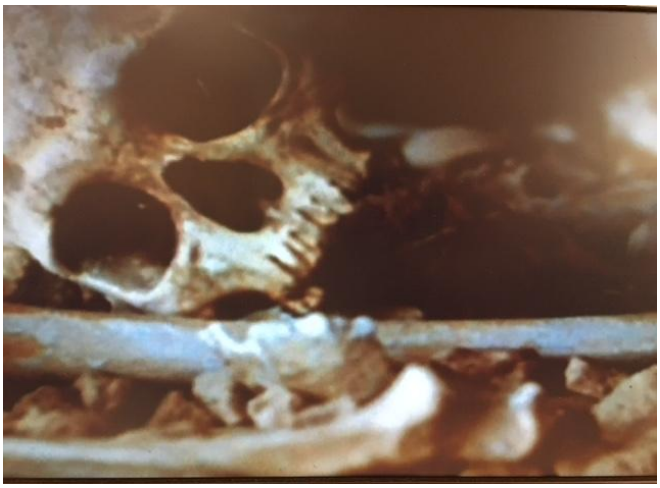

Figure 8

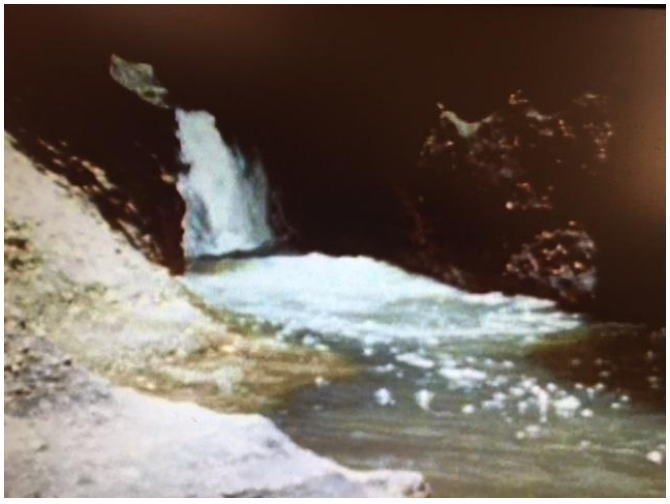

Figure 9

Rouch embraces his subjective experience here, sharing and attempting to induce an empathetic experience in his viewer, though ironically, the sequence bears remarkable resemblance to the opening sequence of Flaherty and Murnau's *Tabu: A Story of the South Seas* (1931).[79] In *Tabu*, a gardenia floats down from an upper cliffside waterfall, linking the young men on the upper level of the cliffs as they descend to the young women bathing in a pool below. In *Tabu* this device is part of an idyllic setting, one of playful young love that sets the scene for

[79] While I cannot confirm that Rouch had seen *Tabu,* it seems likely, as Rouch credits Flaherty as one of his strongest influences. Though *Tabu* is now known to have been primarily a vehicle for Murnau, the opening sequence with the gardenia is entirely Flaherty's.

tragedy, and while it may seem an odd choice to graft onto *Cemeteries in the Cliffs,* Rouch uses it to perform the reverse task: to bring us back from tragedy to a familiar denouement of pleasure and poignancy, the narrative resolution that is expected. Rouch's curious ending, with no ethnographic subjects in sight, appears to emerge not from observation, but from the popular elegiac text.

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"Shared Ethnography"

The next phase of Rouch's filmmaking shows the first inklings of "shared ethnography" and arguably Rouch's first gesture toward ethnofiction.[80] After filming *Cemeteries in the Cliffs*, Rouch and Rosfelder crossed the Nigerian border, where they made three films: two lesser known films, including one on Songhay rainmaking ceremonies*,* and *Bataille sur la grande fleuve/Hippopotamus Hunting with Harpoons. Hippopotamus Hunting with Harpoons* contained in one form or another all the elements that were to become Rouch's hallmark-- the suggestion of acting, collaboration, and reconstructed scenes--but it would also be the first film that Rouch screened for his subjects, though the screening would not take place for more than two years.

The status of this event in ethnographic film, much like the other famed origin stories regarding Rouch's style, bears evidence of its frequent retelling: "Rouch showed the film many times that night: in some versions of the story, it was three times, in others four, in some it is even claimed that there were five showings."[81] The audience's reaction was, according to Rouch, both lively and varied. On the one hand, the audience objected to Rouch's soundtrack, such that

[80] Paul Henley argues that although *Jaguar* is considered Rouch's first ethnofiction, "there had been a clear hint of a movement in that direction in the making of *Bataille sur le grand fleuve* in 1951...Even in *Cimetières dans la falaise*, shot the year before that, the throwing of the baobab flower into the stream in order to reinforce the symbolic significance of the final shot already indicated an interest on Rouch's part in going beyond impassive scientific description." Henley, *Adventure of the Real*, 73.
[81] Ibid., 63-65.

from that point forward he would generally refrain from using non-diegetic sound in his films. Rouch had used as background music local hunting songs that he and Rosfelder had recorded themselves, but some in the audience felt it was not realistic to have loud music playing while characters were trying to hunt. On the other hand, some audience members reacted very strongly to the images of people who had since passed away, reportedly "believing that somehow their souls had suddenly rematerialized in the form of the film."[82] This story, of an audience in mourning, would come to take on more significance later in Rouch's career,[83] yet bizarrely, even this story of an audience in mourning may have its origins in *Tabu*. Floyd Crosby, one of the men who worked with Flaherty and Murnau on *Tabu* told a story that one of the original actors in *Tabu* reportedly told him that *Tabu* would be shown in Tahiti periodically, and "everyone would go to see Grandma and Grandpa. The audience would cry because everyone was dead."[84] While there is no evidence to suggest that Rouch was aware of this anecdote (or Crosby of Rouch's), the coincidence suggests that such stories of ethnographic subjects using their images on film to mourn had achieved the status of cultural fable.

A third reaction from the audience would grow into Rouch's next major project, a film that would dramatically divert the course of Rouch's career. Damouré Zika, the Nigerien who had been Rouch's assistant during the war and who had served a similar role during his first doctoral expedition, had been one of the film's two main protagonists, along with Illo Gaoudel, and both of them were in the audience. According to Rouch, it was Zika and Gaoudel who

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[82] Ibid.

[83] Rouch would relate this story to Enrico Fulchignoni in 1980: "...in no more than twenty seconds, [the audience] understood the language of cinema. They recognized their village, Ayorou; they recognized themselves. Then all of a sudden, some people who had died since the filming appeared on the screen, and all the people of the village started to cry; we heard such wailing that the soundtrack served absolutely no purpose. After the first projection, the villagers asked to see it a second time, and they began crying again; then a third time, and then they began to see the film. And then, suddenly, they understood what I was doing. I had by then been working in Ayorou for twelve years." Jean Rouch and Enrico Fulchignoni in "Cine-Anthropology," *Cine-Ethnography* (Minneapolis: Minnesota, 2003), 157.

[84] Scott Eyman, "Sunrise in Bora Bora," *Film Comment* 26, no. 6 (Nov/Dec 1990): 80.

nurtured Rouch's popular ambitions, requesting that they make a "real film" next time, a film "like Zorro."[85] Along with Lam Ibrahim Dia, this discussion would set the foursome on the path to making *Jaguar*, the first of Rouch's many ethnofictions and the beginning of a collaboration that would last throughout Rouch's career.

Starting with *Jaguar*, Rouch's style would undergo a dramatic shift in the mid-1950s. Rouch would make a string of what would come to be known as ethnofictions, films made in close collaboration with his subjects that centered on a semi-fictional narrative, including *Mad Masters* (shot in 1954) *I, A Negro* (shot in 1957), *Human Pyramid* (1961), *Little By Little* (shot in 1967), and *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961), his related experiment in cinéma vérité with Edgar Morin.[86] Much like *Jaguar, Mad Masters* was commissioned by the Hauka who appear in it, *I, A Negro,* was primarily narrated by the subject, Oumarou Ganda, and *Little by Little* emerged out of Zika's dissatisfaction with the final version of *Jaguar*. Similarly, *Chronicle of a Summer* was a total experiment in cinéma vérité, in which subjects and filmmakers appeared on screen together, engaged by a highly mobile and interactive camera that was a "catalyst" for the dramatic action, driven by the notion that the observer and subject are always implicated by the other in the act of filming. As Rouch puts it, "From the moment you interview me, you are no longer the same and I am no longer the same."[87] By elevating the film subjects to co-creators, giving them the freedom to write, improvise, and criticize, while demoting himself to "first

[85] Henley, *The Adventure of the Real*, 65.
[86] Since I am focusing on Rouch's creative approach rather than reception, I note the year these films were shot instead of the year they were released, since in most cases, the films would not be released until 15-20 years after they were made. For more specific production and release information, see Henley, *Adventures of the Real*, 422, Appendix II.
[87] Unpublished interview from 1981. Qtd. in De Queiroz, Ruben Caixeta, "Between the Sensible and the Intelligible: Anthropology and the Cinema of Marcel Mauss and Jean Rouch," trans. by David Rodgers, *Vibrant* 9 no.2 (July-/Dec 2012): 194.

spectator,"[88] Rouch's ethnofiction and cinéma vérité period (1955-66) fundamentally redefined the relationship between subject and filmmaker.

One of the ways ethnofiction accomplishes this effect is by foregrounding the thoughts, desires, fantasies, and memories of its subjects. Given the chance to speak, these subjects often represent themselves in relation to forces like historical change, migration, urbanization, consumer culture-- concepts that were taboo to the salvage paradigm's mission of preserving a static pre-modern world. Elegiac narratives do not necessarily disappear in ethnofiction, but they are unmistakably modern. Subjects bear witness to the personal impact of war, displacement, and economic hardship, often directly to the camera and in a manner that they can control. One of the most famous sequences of Rouch's vérité period is Marceline Loridan's monologue in *Chronicle of a Summer*. The sequence begins as a camera films her from a moving vehicle and slowly pulls away. By the end of the sequence, we are at such a distance from Marceline that she is barely visible. She carries her own audio recording device down a crowded street, so that only her outline is visible, but we can still hear her perfectly, and can detect the emotion in her voice as she talks about losing her father at Auschwitz. In contrast to the mother's lament in *Cemeteries in the Cliffs*, the sequence with Marceline gives her the opportunity to share her own memories of suffering and loss, through a new visual strategy that allows her the freedom to distance herself from the camera's gaze.

In *I, A Negro*, Rouch uses the pastoral elegy to great effect during one of Oumarou Ganda's monologues. *I, A Negro* follows Ganda, a migrant worker from Niger, in his difficult daily life around Abidjan. Towards the end of the film, Ganda (who goes by the name Edward G. Robinson) and his friend Jules are sitting along the laguna so that they can "reflect a little bit," as

[88] Jean Rouch, "The Camera and the Man," *Cine-Ethnography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 9.

Ganda says. "Look at all this, Jules, what does this remind you of?...Tell me it looks like...Niamey, our native country. Where you were born. Where I was born. Where your father was born, where my father was born. Marvelous. How good it is to be Nigerien."[89] While Ganda begins to speak of his childhood memories bathing in the Niger River, Rouch shows us children laughing and leaping from the Niger River bank and women laying out their laundry to dry. Though not literal images of Oumarou Ganda as a child, this sequence illustrates Ganda's memories so closely that they almost appear to be projected directly out of Ganda's head.[90] In longing for the Niamey of his childhood, Ganda participates in modern elegy, using themes of nostalgia and exile to situate his own life as a Nigerien migrant worker in Abidjan of the 1960s. Rouch, in supporting Ganda's narration with montage, makes their collaboration visible in the fabric of the film.

This period of filmmaking (1955-66) encompasses such a rich and influential body of work, containing all of Rouch's most well-known films, that one can easily forget they represent only a fraction of his total œuvre. Rouch's vérité period cannot be said to represent a permanent shift in Rouch's approach to ethnographic film; nor was it even a temporary break from it. In 1957, the same year that Rouch shot *I, A Negro*, he also made *Moro Naba: La mort du roi Mossi*/*Moro Naba: The Death of the Mossi King*, a film which closely resembles his style in *Cemeteries In the Cliffs.* As Maxime Scheinfeigel notes, the Rouch known by cinephiles is very different from the Rouch "familiar to people who frequent the Musée de l'Homme and the

[89] Translation my own.
[90] At the same time, the tailoring of the narration to this montage and vice-versa was likely a back-and-forth effort. Ganda recorded the final narration after the film was edited, so surely it was also Ganda who adjusted his narration to fit the images that Rouch provided.

University of Nanterre."[91] The vast majority of Rouch's films consist of relatively conventional ethnographic films that reveal just how easily shared ethnography can be set aside.

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Return to the Dogon

By the mid 1960s, Rouch's growing oeuvre could be separated into two main categories: films made among the Songhay, where Rouch did his independent research, and those made among the Dogon, where Griaule did his. Rouch filmed Songhay possession and rainmaking ceremonies much as he had during his early career throughout the late 60s and into the 1970s. Starting in 1967 and continuing until the end of the 1970s, Rouch returned to film among the Dogon along with Germaine Dieterlen. In these films, as in *Cemeteries in the Cliffs*, we see an ethnography that is emphatically not shared. These films focus on particular events (rituals and ceremonies) rather than people. Subjects only rarely interact with Rouch or the camera and never provide narration. Rouch prioritizes the integrity of the sequence, introducing very few cuts and in most cases, minimal commentary. In the case of the Dogon films, where Rouch's voiceover text is generally taken from Dieterlen and Griaule's ethnographic studies, he privileges preexisting texts over the unfolding event. Themes of history and memory are traded in for mystical themes, almost exclusively focused on possession and death, involving the collective ethnographic subject as a barely differentiated whole.

Though little-discussed in general, the disjuncture between Rouch's popular films and his ethnographic films is usually approached in one of two ways. The first position claims that there is no such disjuncture, that Rouch's ethnographic films do not substantially differ from his ethnofictions, that Rouch crossed disciplinary lines precisely to reveal their arbitrariness. Two

[91] Maxime Scheinfeigel, "La fable documentaire," *Jean Rouch* (Paris: CNRS, 2008), 102.

critics who take this position are Ruben Caixeta de Queiroz and William Rothman, each of whom take pains to draw out the subtle lyricism of Rouch's Dogon films.[92] Yet it was hardly the lyricism of Rouch's ethnofictions that made them radical. Had this been the case, the formal beauty in Regnault's images of the Wolof potter might have served just as well. Oddly enough, De Queiroz argues that the slow motion dance sequences in Rouch's *Le Dama d'Ambara* are "intended to perform an almost purely poetic function," a claim which, given the history of motion photography as a tool for defining racial categories, seems unconvincing.[93] A second position, which Paul Henley takes, suggests that Rouch's change in style may be seen as an act of humility, of deference to Germaine Dieterlen, who had more experience working with the Dogon than he, and to the memory of Griaule, who had asked Rouch to film the Sigui in his stead. While this may be true, it does little to explain why Rouch's films among the Songhay, presumably his area of expertise, were so similar to his Dogon films.

When asked about his "conventional ethnographic methods" in filming the Dogon by Lucien Taylor in 1991, Rouch pointed this out himself: "I did the same thing myself in my own country, Niger. My doctorate was on possession, and I've made about fifty films you don't know about ritual possession there."[94] Rouch concedes that there is a difference between his ethnofictions and his ethnographic films, but he argues that this difference is not absolute: "[I]n a sense my films have returned to a more traditional form of anthropology. But I've retained my own sensibility, and approach, which I characterize as intervening to provoke a certain reality."[95] Like Rothman and de Queiroz, Rouch disputes the notion that his radical intervention was

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[92] William Rothman, "Jean Rouch as Film Artist: *Tourou and Bitti*, *The Old Anaï*, *Ambara Dama*," *Three Documentary Filmmakers: Erroll Morris, Ross McElwee, Jean Rouch* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009), 197-232.
[93] De Queiroz, "Between the Sensible and the Intelligible," 204.
[94] Jean Rouch and Lucien Taylor in "A Life on the Edge of Film and Anthropology," *Cine-Ethnography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 140.
[95] Ibid., 141.

fundamentally about the participation of the subject, that it was a project of representing the camera's mediation, a project which he argues is still subtly maintained in his ethnographic films.

Yet, a look at the full interview suggests Rouch's views were more complex than this, hinging on a firm distinction between the ethnographic subject and his friends:

> [A]s Margaret Mead always urged, one should have two fields in anthropology—even if you never do an explicit comparison, it's necessary for objectivity. But I never learned Dogon—I'm not a very good linguist. I decided to be only a filmmaker, to make the films with Germaine." What I did was to come with my friends—Damouré, Lam, Moussa Amidou—to the Dogon country, and they were as enchanted as I. I discovered another culture. They wanted to be there with me for the filming of the Sigui.[96] [97]

Rouch explains that the Dogon were his second field, which is why he did not have the necessary language training to interact with the Dogon without the help of an interpreter. Yet it is not with the Songhay that the Dogon are contrasted, but with Rouch's Nigerien friends and collaborators. Rouch's comment, couched in humility ("only a filmmaker"), suggests that with total commitment to one community comes a loss of perspective, a lack of appropriate distance from one's subject. Accused of making too conservative a film, Rouch abandons his self-declared amateurism to hide behind authority, not his own, but that of Dieterlen and Griaule. Embracing the scholarly "depth" of stereoscopic vision, Rouch shields himself in the ethnographic authority his ethnofictions supposedly contest. In the end, ethnography can only be shared with Rouch's friends, revealing the non-reproducible, non-transferable nature of the epistemological project that was ostensibly at the root of Rouch's shared ethnography.

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[96] Ibid., 140-141.

[97] Henley writes that although the Dogon of the cliffs and the Songhay of the plains are separated by very little geographically, their languages are mutually unintelligible and their social structures and notable ceremonies are very distinct. Ibid., 221. Henley also writes that Rouch was initially intending just to work as a cameraman, suggesting that he may not have been as dedicated to the project in the beginning. Ibid., 224.

Finally, in the same interview, Rouch provides one more reason for his "return" to traditional ethnographic film: his frustration with postcolonial politics:

> When ...there was the first coup d'état in Africa, against Nkrumah in Ghana, I knew that it was finished, that there was something wrong in the constitution of power—if you take power, the power takes you. I saw then that the only "way" was to go back to the traditional way of life and way of thinking. This is why I have filmed so much among the Dogon.[98]

Rouch frames his Dogon films as a response to the overthrow of Kwame Nkrumah in 1966, the year before Rouch began filming among the Dogon. If Rouch's ethnofictions focused on his subjects' social, political, and historical relationships to a modern world, his films among the Dogon rarely acknowledged that such relationships were possible. The localized concerns of the Dogon are represented as removed from larger questions of power and statecraft. Rouch's explicitly acknowledgement of conservatism in his later films suggests that his return to the Dogon represented not only a return to an earlier period of his career--before his politically committed cinema--but a return to an earlier era, a world anterior to the corrupting nature of power and politics.[99]

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The Sensitive Camera

Though Rouch never wholly abandoned his early surrealist roots, his ethnographic films of the 1970s can also be seen as a return to the surrealist principles that Rouch used to give shape to the arc of his career and to reconcile the contradictions within it. In an earlier essay from 1962, Rouch wrote that his inspirations for films:

> …[come] upon me suddenly, on the roads of Africa or on the rivers, baptized in that strange contact with the countryside or climates, where the lone voyager discovers what he was looking for with such insistence, that dialogue

[98] Rouch and Taylor in "A Life on the Edge of Film and Anthropology," *Cine-Ethnography,* 140.

[99] As we will see in the final section, this view could not be more different from the perspective of Dogon community leaders with whom Rouch was in contact.

> with himself, with his own dreams, that faculty of "intimate distance" with the world and with mankind, that faculty that anthropologists and poets know so well and that allowed me to be both "entomologist" observer and friend of the *maîtres fous,* the game leader and primary spectator of *Jaguar,* but always on the condition that I not determine the limits of the game whose only rule is to film when you and the others really feel like it.[100]

Rouch's description of his technique closely resembles the disciplined indiscipline of chance objectivity, the rigorous spontaneity that Leiris was never able to perfect. For Rouch, this technique explains his seemingly incongruous role as both an ethnographer and friend. Rather than the result of a negotiation between himself and his subjects, Rouch argues that his films are a channeling of greater forces.

By the 1970s, Rouch's notion of filmmaking as possession would lead to his experiments with "cine-trance," a state of trance or possession induced by filming an event, usually a possession itself.[101] With cine-trance, the powers of mediation are fully transferred to the camera itself. As with Leiris' experiments in chance objectivity, the goal of cine-trance is a transcendence of one's own narrow social and historical circumstances, a process now facilitated by the camera. Rouch explains in an interview in 1980 that his ideal aesthetic was a question of balance between the "sensitive camera of Flaherty [and] the mechanical eye and ear of Vertov."[102] Rouch makes a distinction between the sensitivity of the camera as an instrument which can capture and produce affective experiences and as an automated instrument of perception. By rendering up the self through the act of filming, cine-trance marries the

[100] Rouch, "The Cinema of the Future?" *Cine-Ethnography*, 267.
[101] Rouch's most famous cine-trance experiment was *Tourou et Bitti/Tourou and Bitti* (1971) in which he takes a handheld camera and immerses himself in a possession rite, producing about ten minutes of footage in nearly a single shot. For more on cine-trance, see "Vicissitudes of the Self: The Possessed Dancer, the Magician, the Sorcerer, the Filmmaker, and the Ethnographer," Cine-Ethnography (Minneapolis: University of Michigan, 2003).
[102] Rouch and Fulchignoni in "Cine-Anthropology," *Cine-Ethnography,* 161.

"unconscious optics"[103] of photography and film with the unconscious affect sought by Leiris, a prosthetic device for feeling what his subjects feel, for becoming one of them. By ascribing these powers to the camera, Rouch recuperates an atavistic cinema as radical and utopian, rendering the affective, human, and political dimensions of the encounter a mechanical, instrumental practice.

To return finally to the elegy and the question of the popular in Rouch's traditional ethnographic films, we must consider their paratext: the stories Rouch would tell and retell about their making, and the utopian claims he would make for his filmmaking among the Dogon. Rouch's Dogon films overwhelming focused on funerary rituals. *Sigui Synthèse (1967-1973): L'invention de la parole et de la mort*, co-directed with Germaine Dieterlen, provides a summary of Rouch's six years' worth of footage observing the Sigui, a commemoration of the death of the first ancestor which occurs every sixty years and passes from village to village. Rouch continued with *Dama of Ambara: To Enchant Death* (1974), which shows the ceremony held every four years to lead dead spirits out of the village, and then *Funeral at Bongo: The Old Anaï* (1848-1971) (1979), about the funeral of an elderly man who had presided over one of the Siguis that Rouch filmed. In 1980, Rouch explains in an interview that it was only after making all of these films about death that he has begun to understand their purpose as a whole:

> I began to shoot those films about death among the Dogon of the Bandiagara Cliffs in 1951, and it's only thirty years later that I have begun to understand. If you will, this too is a challenge, a poker game, gambling against the stars. It's telling yourself that when you start a task of this sort, it'll take thirty years to finish it.[104]

[103] I am borrowing Walter Benjamin's phrase. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 237.
[104] Rouch and Fulchignoni in "Cine-Anthropology," *Cine-Ethnography,* 150-151.

Rouch refers here to the long feedback ritual he instituted in the Bandiagara cliffs. Rouch made his camera "sensitive" by doing as Flaherty had done: screening his films for his subjects. Unlike Flaherty, who showed his rushes daily, Rouch held his screenings for the Dogon a year or more later to a much different effect.[105] Since Rouch and Dieterlen returned year after year for a few months at a time to film the next installment of the multi-year Sigui ceremony, they began to bring last years' footage with them to screen for the subjects they had filmed the previous year. Rouch reported that every year, participants would come to mourn those they had lost in the intervening year, just as the Songhay villagers at Ayrou had done in the 1950s. According to Rouch, the Dogon watching his film "relived a past time, animated by a piece of celluloid—reflections of disappeared people, phantom impressions that one sees, that one hears but does not see, or that one does not hear.[106]

Not only would the stories of Dogon mourning join the other stories--part history, part legend-- that have come to define Rouch's popular legacy, they would come to serve as an alibi for ethnographic film. Rouch detested the idea that ethnography was like "a stolen secret, later to be consumed in the Western temples of knowledge."[107] Yet the story of Dogon mourning gives life to the idea that ethnographic film could be useful to the communities in which they had been made. It evokes the poignancy of film as a medium, its ability to capture and log time, and suggests that the sensitive camera's prosthetic function gives audiences access to new dimensions of mourning and intimacy beyond the grave. In the context in which the Dogon mourners are usually evoked--that is, commemorating Jean Rouch's legacy-- it suggests also a

[105] Henley, *The Adventure of the Real,* 254.
[106] Rouch, "Vicissitudes of the Self," *Cine-Ethnography*, 99. See also Henley, *The Adventure of the Real,* 222-224 for a detailed explanation of the logistics of the Sigui: "The Sigui moves in a northeast to southwest direction, along the line of the Bandiagara Escarpment. As it does so, it also moves up and down the escarpment, alternating between villages on the edge of the plain at the foot of the escarpment and those on the plateau on top of the escarpment. "
[107] Rouch, "Vicissitudes of the Self," *Cine-Ethnography,* 101.

desire for ethnographic film to function like a gift, the ultimate Maussian symbol of reciprocity, to give the impression that its benefits as well its labor are equally shared.

Yet this extension of Rouch's "shared ethnography" is still emphatically personal, rather than social or political, an offering to family and friends that is illegible to a mass audience. Rouch's use of his footage strives for something like what Benjamin terms the "cult value," of an image. For Benjamin, cult value has been largely evacuated from mechanically reproduced images in photography and film, though "its ultimate retrenchment" remains "the human countenance…The cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refuge for the cult value of the picture. For the last time the aura emanates from early photographs in the fleeting expression of a human face. This is what constitutes their melancholy, incomparable beauty."[108] In the concept of cult value is a nostalgia for a primitive function of the camera. Rouch cites Breton when he claims "What our culture lacks is a myth," adding that, "In effect, it lacks a myth that could be the foundation of those marvelous rituals we have lost."[109] Rouch's work suggests a strong desire for film to provide the revelatory and redemptive foundations of these renewed myths, set by the example of the Dogon.

* * *

John Marshall's "Kalahari Family"

In the previous section, I argued that Rouch's return to Dogon country in the 1970s should be understood as a retreat from shared ethnography and postcolonial politics. Seeking similar refuge in the wake of one world war with the threat of another looming, John Marshall's father Laurence moved his family to southern Africa in 1950 to observe the legendary Kalahari "bushmen," in the belief that their primitive forms of peacekeeping would provide an alternative

[108] Benjamin, *Illuminations,* 225-226.
[109] Rouch and Fulchignoni in "Cine-Anthropology," *Cine-Ethnography*, 152.

to contemporary Cold War politics. If Rouch's model for ethnographic relationship was friendship, John Marshall's was family. Though John Marshall could be said to have grown up alongside the Ju/'hoansi of Nyae Nyae, the communally-owned land along what is now the Namibia-Botswana border where his family settled, he did so with a camera in his hand, debuting his first ethnographic film at twenty-three years old, the first film of a long career.

Unlike Rouch, Marshall resists sentimentalizing his subjects and romanticizing his own work, but the metaphor of the family remained the central thread of his lifelong career. At the same time, where Rouch sacrificed a bull to make amends for the colonial roads he built in Niger during World War II, Marshall would spend his life trying to atone for the roads his family built into Nyae Nyae. Made accessible by the Marshalls' roads, the Ju/'hoansi--and their land-- were now located at the intersection of powerful geopolitical interests: the military force of the Apartheid government and the might of international capital. In an attempt to come to their aid, Marshall tries to weaponize his life's work, to marry the principles of humanitarianism to his vast archive of Ju/'hoansi footage, but these weapons are more often and more effectively used against him, until there is little Marshall can use them for but mourning.

* * *

1950-1958: Two Families

A Kalahari Family (2001), John Marshall's final film, opens with the dedication of a memorial to man named ≠Oma "Stumpy" Tsamkxao.[110] Displaying a plaque fixed to a massive baobab [Figure 10], Marshall confesses that the memorial is not of ethnographic significance, that the Ju/'hoansi "don't erect memorials for their dead. It was my idea to put up the memorial here...where our families first met." Marshall explains that when he first met ≠Oma Tsamkxao

[110] Marshall sometimes renders Tsamkxao as Tsamko.

here in 1950, he gave Marshall his own name to use among the Ju/'hoansi, a name meaning "Long Face." John followed ≠Oma Tsamkxao and his family, particularly his eldest son Tsamkxao and his cousin N!ai throughout his years of filming, but by marking the death of ≠Oma Tsamkxao, Marshall sets the tone for a film which chronicles not only the end but the undoing of his lifelong efforts, the destruction of a relationship of trust and intimacy between himself and ≠Oma Tsamkxao's living relatives, and the unintentional and devastating consequences of his and his family's personal role in the Ju/'hoansi's struggle to keep their land and livelihood.

Figure 10

But *A Kalahari Family* is also the story of a second family: the Marshall family. Around the time Jean Rouch was filming *Cimetières dans la falaise*, John and his family were making their first visit to Nyae Nyae. Laurence Marshall, who had recently retired from Raytheon, the company he co-founded, and was preparing to take his whole family to do an ethnographic study on the Ju/'hoansi, commonly (and pejoratively) called "bushmen."[111] The Marshall's study was

[111] "Ju/'hoansi" or "Zhu" people are one of many indigenous peoples that were once classified pejoratively as "Bushman," whereas the term "San" is a recent term which refers to all of the ethnic groups formerly known as "Bushmen." "!Kung" refers to Ju/'hoansi who speak one of the !Kung language dialects. Though the spelling "Zhu" is more commonly used today, I retain the term Ju/'hoansi for clarity's sake, as that is the term Marshall consistently uses.

essentially self-financed: Laurence Marshall donated some of his fortune to the Harvard Peabody Museum and Smithsonian Institute for the express purpose of funding the exhibition, and in return, the Marshalls solicited consultation and personnel from Harvard, though Harvard provided only the former.[112] The Marshalls are thought to have been inspired to study "bushmen" in particular because of a 1947 *Life Magazine* photo essay on the "bushmen" of the Gemsbok National Park, a forerunner of the photographs that were to become a part of the famous "Family of Man" exhibition already mentioned.[113] In his study of the Marshall family archive at the Peabody, Edwin Wilmsen reports that the photo-essay issue was among the family papers, and though it is unclear whether or not it was the original inspiration for the Marshall's ethnographic journey, its presence suggests at the very least that the "'Bushmen,' in the image into which they were to be molded, were already in the Marshalls' minds [when they first went to southern Africa]."[114]

Much like Family of Man" exhibition that would appear just a few years later, the Marshalls espoused a form of progressive humanism that emphasized the conservation of cultures, in the hopes that they might hold the key to defusing Cold War tensions. The Marshalls, as Nancy Gonzalez describes them, were "like others of like mind in the fifties, they rued the advance of 'civilization and wished for the preservation of an intact 'Bushman' socio-cultural

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[112] Edwin N. Wilmsen, "Knowledge as the Source of Progress: The Marshall Family Testament to the "Bushmen." *Visual Anthropology* 12, no. 2-3 (1999) 217-18.

[113] According to Richard B. Lee, the famous photograph of a "Bushman" showing his son how to hunt with a spear that was eventually included in the "Family of Man" exhibition was taken in the same place as the 1947 essay, the following year (1948) and also by a *Life* photographer, suggesting that the photo-essay the Marshalls saw in 1947 was only slightly different. "Indigenous Rights and the Politics of Identity in Post-Apartheid Southern Africa," *At the Risk of Being Heard: Identity, Indigenous Rights, and Postcolonial States*, ed. Bartholomew Dean and Jerome M. Levi (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2006), 91.

[114] Edwin N. Wilmsen, "Knowledge as the Source of Progress: The Marshall Family Testament to the "Bushmen." *Visual Anthropology* 12, no. 2-3 (1999) 215. Wilmsen cites the *Life* magazine issue as follows: Donald Burke, "The Bushmen: An Ancient Race Struggles to Survive in the South African Deserts," *Life* 22 (3 Feb.): 91-97.

system.'"[115] The Bushmen at the time were not considered a "living" people, but living remnants of the Paleolithic Age, which is likely why the Marshalls' project interested mostly archeologists rather than anthropologists. Wilmsen speculates that the Marshalls, as amateurs, likely hoped to collect data that could later be used by experts to corroborate other scholars' findings.[116] At the same time, it is possible that Laurence Marshall had commercial intentions for the images that the family took. He had attempted to run a national television network out of Boston two years prior and had stipulated to Harvard that all photographs and images were to be his exclusive property.[117] But the Marshalls were also drawn to the Ju/'hoansi as a refuge from modern geopolitics and potentially, as a solution to them. Wilmsen suggests that Laurence may have been motivated by his guilt over Raytheon's role in the war (it supplied radar for the navy during World War II and had played an important role in developing a trigger for the atomic bomb) and was hoping the life of the "bushmen" might offer a Cold War lesson about de-escalation.[118]

Though manned by a team of amateurs, two of them teenagers (John and his sister Elizabeth), the Marshalls' study was well organized. Every member had a role, and John was to act as the dedicated camera man. Armed only with an Eastman Kodak "How to Make a Movie" guide and a "Notes and Queries" script published in 1929 by the British Association for the Advancement of Science, John had to teach himself how to use his Arriflex camera. Marshall's father, influenced by Margaret Mead,[119] advised him not to direct his Ju/'hoansi subjects, but to use the camera as a simple recording device. John followed a pre-prepared list of ethnographic

[115] Nancy Gonzalez, " A Film Argument," *The Cinema of John Marshall*, ed.Jay Ruby (Philadelphia: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1993), 184.
[116] Wilmsen, "Knowledge as the Source of Progress," 220-222.
[117] Ibid., 217.
[118] Ibid., 219.
[119] Ibid., 220.

topics, starting with “technology” --Laurence’s pet interest--and so his early footage focused especially on the Ju/’hoansi fashioning nets and arrows.[120]

Yet John writes that he ultimately found that "merely shooting for a record was artificial and insensitive,”[121] and began to cultivate his “artistic ambitions.” As a teenager, he produced what is now considered a classic of ethnographic cinema, *The Hunters* (1957), which follows four Ju/’hoansi men on a hunting trip as they track a giraffe. Criticizing the film in 1993, Marshall writes that *The Hunters* was too much in the Flahertian mold, though he had actually been inspired by a different Romantic model-- Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*: "I had not seen *Nanook of the North* when I made *The Hunters*, but [I presented] the chance of the giraffe as a kind of struggle against nature, which is the theme in Flaherty's classic.”[122] Marshall explains how he achieved his striking images, climbing trees to get better vantage points, splicing in footage of multiple giraffes to represent the one killed, using composite Ju/'hoansi characters, but it was also the men themselves who helped produce the movie. John admits that they essentially agreed to be actors, tracking the giraffe “mainly for me and the movie.”[123]

Like *Nanook, The Hunters* was celebrated upon its release, winning the Robert J. Flaherty award. Versions of *The Hunters* was shown at the American Anthropological Association meetings in Boston and Philadelphia after it was released on primetime television on CBS, and it was shown again at the American Pavilion at the World's Fair in Brussels in 1958. At the same time, John’s sister Elizabeth Marshall’s book, *The Harmless People*, was at the height of its popularity in the U.S.[124] By 1960, stories about “bushmen” were extremely popular, largely

[120] John Marshall, “Death by Myth,” *The Cinema of John Marshall*, 19; 35.
[121] Ibid., 26.
[122] Ibid., 40.
[123] Ibid., 36-37.
[124] Wilmsen, “Knowledge as the Source of Progress,” 239.

thanks to the Marshalls.[125] John began filming a followup to *The Hunters* called *Bitter Melons*, the story of an elderly Ju/'hoansi named Ukxone and his wife who deliberately starve themselves at the end of the film in order to leave more resources for the young. Marshall later admitted to embellishing *Bitter Melon*s to achieve its Flahertian "poignant ending,"[126] but Marshall also began to distance himself from romantic filmmaking around this time.[127] Marshall would later criticize his early fascination with staging the Ju/'hoansi's struggle against nature as misleading: "The last thing [they] wanted to do was struggle against nature."[128]

* * *

1958-1978: Expulsion and Eviction

In 1958, Marshall's record of life at Nyae Nyae breaks off for two decades. For reasons are still not completely clear, Marshall was expelled by the South African government in 1958, which claimed that he had fathered a black child.[129] The Marshalls had not had much direct contact with South-West African administration, but in 1957, in the interests of protecting the Ju/'hoansi's already severely restricted resources, the Marshalls successfully lobbied the Apartheid government to keep the Herero out of Nyae Nyae. The Herero were evicted by the Apartheid government using the roads that the Marshalls had built. Wilmsen writes that the Marshalls "no doubt .. acted primarily to preserve what they mistakenly thought to be a way of life that had not changed in ages," yet they had nevertheless become "unwitting agents" of Apartheid" and aided in dispossessing Herero from Nyae Nyae and other areas from which they

[125] Wilmsen writes, "John has said, correctly I believe, that simply by being made known through his family's efforts, Khoisan-speaking "Bushmen" were brought into the surviving ethnographic record that intrigued a growing number of anthropologists as well as the general public at the beginning of the 1960s." Ibid., 213; 240.
[126] John Marshall, "Death by Myth," 57.
[127] Robert Gardner, as a young graduate student, was spending time with the Marshalls at Nyae Nyae in the 1950s and John balked at Gardner's more explicit romanticism.
[128] John Marshall, "Death by Myth," *The Cinema of John Marshall,* 40.
[129] Carolyn Anderson and Thomas W. Benson, "Put Down the Camera and Pick Up the Shovel: An Interview with John Marshall," *The Cinema of John Marshall*, 141.

may have had legitimate rights.[130] The roads the Marshalls had built to bring in their supplies would become a means for the Apartheid government to drive out the Ju/'hoansi themselves, and because of his own expulsion John would not witness the consequences of his family's opening up of Nyae Nyae until many years later.

Upon his return to the United States, Marshall obtained formal training in anthropology as well as filmmaking experience in a variety of settings, both of which would play a role in the filmmaking style Marshall would later adopt. In 1958 he went to work for the Leacock-Pennebaker documentary film studio at the heart of the burgeoning Direct Cinema movement, which strongly influenced Marshall even though he was not directly involved in filmmaking there.[131] He attended graduate school in anthropology at Yale and then Harvard, where he began but did not complete his Ph.D. in anthropology.[132] Marshall continued to work on a variety of film projects in the 1960s: documenting police work in Pittsburgh, filming the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974, and working briefly with both Frederick Wiseman on *Titticut Follies* (1967) and with Jean Rouch in 1977, as previously mentioned. Marshall's approach to documentary filmmaking in the 1970s was clearly influenced by filmmakers like Leacock, Wiseman, and Rouch, resulting in a style of realism that "need not be emotionally distant."[133] While Marshall emphasized the importance of the camera as a tool for scientific research,[134] the concept of subjectivity was also crucial to Marshall's conception of realism. Marshall explains that for him, "[f]ilming reality is a tautology. Everything a camera sees is real. The problem is whose reality

[130] Wilmsen, "Knowledge as the Source of Progress," 245-246.
[131] Ibid., 231.
[132] Anderson and Benson, "Put Down the Camera and Pick Up the Shovel," 139.
[133] Peter Loizos "For the Record: Documentation Filmmaking from Innocent Realism to Self-Consciousness," *Innovation in Ethnographic Film: From Innocence to Self-Consciousness* (1955-85) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 21.
[134] Ibid., 17.

are we seeing and who are we when we are looking through a camera?[135] But by the time Marshall returned to southern Africa to check in with his Nyae Nyae family, he would become overwhelmingly concerned with popular ethnography and its ability to perpetuate what Marshall called ethnographic "myths."

Marshall first returned to southern Africa in 1971 to work for the National Geographic Society on the production of the television special "Bushmen of the Kalahari (1973)."[136] In 1978, Marshall went to Tshumkwe, the administrative capital of Eastern Bushmanland in present-day Namibia (a homeland administered by the apartheid government of South Africa), where he found 800 Ju/'hoansi living in what Marshall described as a slum half the size of the territory they once occupied, among them the Ju/'hoansi he had lived with at Nyae Nyae. Without sufficient territory to gather food, without permission to hunt, and without access to their ancestral water holes, many Ju/'hoansi on the reservation were dying of starvation and tuberculosis.

In his 1993 essay "Death by Myth" Marshall links this dire situation to ethnographic mythmaking: "Today, the most dangerous threat to to Ju/'hoansi ... comes from the myths in which Ju/'hoansi and all San peoples remain embedded like flies in amber."[137] Myth, for Marshall is the collection of "fantasies projected onto Jun/'hoansi by writers and filmmakers…[which are] deeply embedded and widely held."[138] These myths attested to the inferiority and naivete of the "Bushman" a catch-all racial category which included the Ju/'hoansi and other San people. The so-called "Bushman" of these myths could not understand time and therefore could not plant seeds to farm, he possessed a "killing instinct" and so could

[135] John Marshall, "Death by Myth," *The Cinema of John Marshall*, 37.
[136] Wilmsen, "Knowledge as the Source of Progress," 231.
[137] John Marshall, "Death by Myth," *The Cinema of John Marshall,* 19.
[138] Ibid., 3.

not tend livestock, and he had no notion of private property, and thus had no right to the land on which he lived or the waterholes he used. Used as justification for the appropriation Ju/'hoansi land for the interests of the Apartheid government and the commercial interests of white South Africans, these racist myths, often perpetuated by popular, pseudo-ethnographic stories, prove extremely dangerous.

Marshall acknowledged that films like *The Hunters* had unintentionally played into the very stereotypes used to justify the appropriation of Nyae Nyae, and he often expressed skepticism that film and media could be used as a tool for education, quipping that "terms like 'visual literacy' and 'media wise' are oxymora."[139] For Marshall the question of whether the emotional impact of popular films could be enlisted *against* myth remained an urgent (and unanswered) question. In "Death by Myth," Marshall asks rhetorically, "Can the capacity of film to elicit emotion be used to stimulate thought?"[140] At one point he cites Tsamkxao, the son of his mentor:

> There are two kinds of films. One kind shows us as people like other people, who have things to do and plans to make. These films show us with our cattle, our farms and the boreholes we have to drill for our water. This kind helps us. The other kind shows us wearing skins as if we were animals, and plays right into the hands of people who want to take our land.[141]

As in Rouch's shared ethnography, Marshall worked closely with Ju/'hoansi like Tsamkxao. He saw his work as an attempt to represent not just what was in front of the camera, but the preoccupations, aspirations, and dreams of his subjects, to show how communities go on living after the cameras are gone. But in a departure from Rouch, Marshall also grew deeply concerned with revealing the social, historical, and governmental forces that shaped Ju/'hoansi life.

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[139] Ibid., 107.
[140] Ibid., 3.
[141] Tsamkxao Toma's dialogue here will also appear verbatim in *A Kalahari Family*. Ibid.

N!ai, The Story of a !Kung Woman

Marshall would make his most well-known film, *N!ai, The Story of a !Kung Woman*, about N!ai, a woman living at Tshumkwe and the cousin of ≠Oma Stumpy Tsamkxao's.[142] We meet N!ai as she is standing in a long line for mealie meal, which is one of the only sources of food for Ju/'hoansi in Tshumkwe. N!ai shows a dogtag that proves she is a TB patient, and a man verifies her name on a clipboard and distributes her portion. N!ai tells us, in a voiceover translated into English, that before the reservation was built, the Ju/'hoansi used to forage for an array of fresh foods and gather water from streams and deep roots across their communal land. Rather than use reenactment like Rouch, Marshall actually shows us all of these things in a montage, using archival footage of the same Ju/'hoansi subjects gathering the food and water that N!ai describes [Figure 11].

Figure 11

In the next sequence, we see N!ai seated in a medium shot [Figure 12], where she explains to us the meaning of her name: "short face," a desirable feature that inspired her sister to make up a song asking her to give up her face. N!ai starts to sing this song for us, and in a remarkable cut, N!ai is transformed into her younger self, a young girl, also seated in a medium shot and also singing [Figure 13]. Using his own archival footage, Marshall takes us back in time

[142] "!Kung" refers to Ju/'hoansi who speak one of the !Kung language dialects.

nearly thirty years. It is a miraculous but poignant moment: N!ai's youth and carefree song conjure up a time before the clipboards and tuberculosis tags, before N!ai could have imagined the difficulties that life at Tshumkwe would bring her.

Figure 12

Figure 13

In *N!ai,* Marshall's earlier footage takes on new meaning. Though many other San peoples in the 1950s had already been under a great deal of pressure to sustain themselves--hiring themselves out to white farmers for cornmeal or to work in the dangerous diamond mines, and by the 1960s, to fight for the Portuguese in the Angolan War of Independence--these signs of

strain are conspicuously absent in Marshall's 1950's footage of the Ju/'hoansi. Marshall writes that it was only through retrospective lack that the relative abundance of water among the Ju/'hoansi during this turbulent time could be seen. Marshall writes that though he had not been:

> acutely conscious of the centrality of water in the web of life...I often followed people when they went to fill their pots and ostrich eggshells. [This early footage] shows the value of the permanent waterhole...when I filmed men distorting in the pan I was more interested in learning how to shoot with angles and distances than I was in showing the problems of water scarcity in Nyae Nyae. We simply loved bathing and playing in the sweet water of N!ama after a season of strong rain."[143]

In retrospect, it was the Ju/'hoansi's control over their own water sources, Marshall writes, that kept Ju/'hoansi institutions, such as marriage and private property, intact, and allowed them to remain relatively independent of the South African government though it also obscured the encroaching South African state. It is only with time that the significance of some of Marshall's early footage becomes apparent, that certain *objets troublants* emerge from these pastoral scenes.

Marshall recontextualizes his 1950s footage by using a Rouchian technique: the narration of an ethnographic subject. For most of the first twenty-five minutes of the film, N!ai narrates her life story through a voice-over translation while Marshall's archival footage illustrates the stories she tells. His camera captures her as she grew up: clinging to her mother as a young girl, playing with her friends, resisting her marriage to her future husband, /Gunda, fearfully witnessing her friend's unsuccessful childbirth. Though it is populated by memories both bitter and sweet, the Nyae Nyae we experience is unabashedly romantic. Rather than the lines for food, dogtags, and close quarters we saw at Tshumkwe, Nyae Nyae reappears with abundant water holes, fresh fruit and nuts for the picking, open plains, majestic giraffe on the horizons. In fact, Marshall incorporates footage from *The Hunters* [Figure 14], despite his own criticism of it.

[143] Ibid., 59.

Figure 14

Yet with N!ai as our guide, we are not so much visiting Nyae Nyae as we are her childhood and her recollections of the life she lived in a particular place. N!ai tells us, "We did what our hearts wanted. We lived in different places, far apart, and when our hearts wanted to travel, we traveled. We were not poor. We had everything we could carry. No one told us what to do." N!ai's memories of life before Tshumkwe are enmeshed in her own childhood memories, and imbued with the particular pleasures, fears, and longings of a life lived there. Moreover, her remembrances are given life by Marshall's own teenage concept of Nyae Nyae, reflected in his own subjective footage. When N!ai tells us that her father was such a good hunter that if he decided to set off, "the animal was as good as dead," her hyperbole is well-matched with Marshall's own mythic images of the Ju/'hoansi hunters, showing that Marshall's opposition to ethnographic myth does not mean an end to storytelling.

N!ai gives us a sense of the social relationships that surround her and the indigenous institutions and customs upon which their community once relied, such as marriage, inheritance laws, property rights, but as the film begins to break out of N!ai's memories and into the present-day, we start to see the extent to which the South African government has circumscribed or replaced these customs. As we have seen, without land, the Ju/'hoansi are no longer able to

migrate or sustain themselves on gathering. Hunting large game is illegal, enforced by the game wardens. The Ju/'hoansi are driven to hunt illegally, caught between fear of jail and letting their families starve, since they do not enjoy the same conservation efforts as the fauna the wardens protect. We encounter military officers doing brisk business recruiting for the South African army, one of the few stable sources of income. The soldiers who enlist will fight in the border war against SWAPO, the South-West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO), meaning that they will fight for government's right to keep land that was taken from the Ju/'hoansi and other San.

Marshall's empathetic rendering of N!ai and her community contrasts sharply with the way they are viewed by the white characters of Tshumkwe. The white men and women we meet, both the ones who employ the Ju/'hoansi as workers as well as those who ostensibly serve the Ju/'hoansi, scorn them. Even the clinic doctor, whom we meet when N!ai goes to have her T.B monitored, casually dismisses the illness of N!ai's infant niece, a sickness which later proves fatal. Hemmed in on all sides, the Ju/'hoansi are rendered completely dependent on these government services which always fail them. At one point, Marshall asks an official about the national budget allocated for Tshumkwe. We learn that there is money allocated for firebreaks, a school, a clinic, and "personal relations." Sponsored dances, rituals, celebrations are, according to the official, intended to foster a sense of community between Ju/'hoansi and South Africans, but the visual image that Marshall provides undercuts this claim: these events are a tourist's display, with the Ju/'hoansi performing while the South Africans take photographs.

Marshall's image of the Ju/'hoansi dancing under the flash of cameras hints at the perverse relationship he sees between the brutality of the Apartheid government and the mass market for exotic images of the "bushman." As an example of the relationship between

Apartheid ideology and popular pseudo-ethnography, Marshall bring us onto the set of one of the most popular and highest-earning foreign films of the 1980s: Jamie Uys' *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (1980).[144] We observe Uys in the process of filming one of the last sequences of the film, a scene which includes both N!ai and Gao, another Tshumkwe resident who plays the main character, N!Xau. Marshall captures a moment where Uys obliges Gao to continually redo a scene where he greets the boy playing his son. Uys might be considered another offspring of Flaherty's popular ethnography, though there is nothing participatory about his variant. We see N!ai complain that the story doesn't make any sense and that she doesn't even know who she is supposed to be playing. The characters have little control over the story or their role within it, and even their gestures are directed down to the smallest movements.

Uys' resulting film is a projection of Apartheid's racist order, one which appears to justify San captivity in homelands and which depicts their life there as a pastoral fantasy. N!Xau, much like Nanook, is depicted as a simple, cheerful "bushman" whose world is upended when he comes across an object he has never seen before: a coke bottle. As we saw with Nanook and the gramophone, Uys' naive "bushmen" are apparently fish out of water the moment they encounter modern life. In the film, N!Xau becomes entangled in larger social and political forces in South Africa that he cannot understand and which only endanger him. Not only can modernity offer nothing to the bushmen, according to the logic of *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, it represents a nefarious force from which the bushman must be protected.

The sequence that Uys struggles to film is meant to show a triumphant N!Xau returning to his now-peaceful village, unencumbered with money or any trace of the "outside" world, yet when Marshall follows N!ai off-set, he observes just the opposite: the conflicts that poverty is

[144] In 2006, the film had earned over $100 million worldwide. Keyan G. Tomaselli, "Rereading *The Gods Must Be Crazy* Films," *Visual Anthropology* 19, 2006: 172.

causing among the Ju/'hoansi. Because N!ai is paid for her acting, she is often confronted by her poorer neighbors,[145] and Marshall's camera observes an escalating fight over the distribution of resources. A hungry neighbor thinks N!ai is hoarding money, and as more people get involved, the group's anger shifts to N!ai's daughter (accused of too great an intimacy with a man in Marshall's crew), and the fight explodes into blows, ending with N!ai in tears.

Unlike Uys' film, in which any arbitrary sign of the wider world throws the "bushmen" into chaos, Marshall frames this conflict as a group coming to terms with larger forces that are affecting internal dynamics. We are privy to a discussion about who is responsible for the situation and who should be punished. N!ai blames in part the presence of the two white filmmakers--Uys and Marshall, and though Marshall does not dispute this, he would later describe the complex personal histories that had likely fueled this heated argument: "[N!ai's] oldest son had died several months before the filming. The baby of her cousin is dying. Her son-in-law, who drinks, has been abusing her daughter, Huan//a, who is escaping her misery by flirting with a member of my staff. /Gunda is both ashamed of the fighting in the family and feeling left out of the excitement. He is also depressed by his inability to cure. Everybody is hungry."[146] None of this is explicitly articulated in the particular sequence, but Marshall's collage of stories encourages us to see the complex and invisible forces which contribute to the environment of despair and blame that envelops Tshumkwe.

Though mourning has become a part of life at Tshumkwe, Marshall does not ask his subjects specifically about lost loved ones or address their grief directly. For example, in one scene, we see Ju/'hoansi men enlisting in the South African army. Marshall focuses on a much

[145] One detail implied but not included in *N!ai* is the favoritism shown to N!ai and her husband by the colonial administration of Tshumkwe as a result of the Marshall's attention, employing her husband and ensuring their family a steadier flow of money than the rest of the Ju/'hoansi at Tshumkwe. Wilmsen, "Knowledge as the Source of Progress," 244.
[146] Ibid., 90.

older man among them, who is gamely trying to follow the training exercises. Marshall shows him hoisting himself onto the back of a military jeep with difficulty and promising to get coffee with a friend when he returns [Figure 15]. Marshall cuts to a white soldier who tells him that most recruited Ju/'hoansi "will stay the rest of their lives there."[147]

Figure 15

In another sequence, we learn that N!ai's niece has died, though we do not see anything of her funeral. Instead we see the healing ceremony that /Gunda and others perform for her just before she dies. The Ju/'hoansi practice of trance healing, called "half-death," is introduced early in the film. Marshall explains the principle behind it: "God comes to the people himself or sends his agents, the spirits of the dead, to bring sickness and death. But God also provides the spiritual power, the n/um, which is an inner curing force. N/um can be activated within certain people to fight against God's will and sometimes to cure disease." In the healing scene, /Gunda goes into a trance which, because of its strain on the heart, Marshall tells us, is a very dangerous, potentially fatal form of curing. /Gunda's face reveals his induced terror, grief, and suffering; he is stuck, helpless in a state of half-death looking for the baby in an invisible realm we cannot see [Figure 16]. N!ai holds the sick baby during the ceremony and tells us that this is the same way her

[147] In A *Kalahari Family,* we learn that this man, Crooked /Ui, was sent home from the army due to illness.

oldest son died, in her arms, but as a grown man. It becomes clear that we are witnessing an iteration, an invisible chain of death and grief, and though as viewers we cannot see it nor presume to share it, /Gunda's anguished expression reminds us that this horror is still very real.

Figure 16

By using subtly affecting images like /Gunda in trance, Marshall suppresses the melodrama and sensationalism that he finds dangerous in popular ethnography. More than a decade after filming *N!ai*, Marshall writes:

> There are better styles of filmmaking than shooting sequences to evoke moods, to conjure sadness, rewrite history or mourn passings. If the worst happens to Ju/'hoansi, and they are finally dispossessed, the record will show the children what their parents achieved against heavy odds with their farms and institutions … The record will stand against the myths.[148]

Though Marshall foresees the possibility that his record of Tshumkwe may be one of the last, he argues that his restrained aesthetic is also an ethic, a way of documenting for the next generation what happened in Tshumkwe.

Yet within *N!ai*, Marshall is not explicit about the role of his film. We glimpse the disruption that has crew and camera bring into Tshumkwe, and there is a suggestion that

[148] Ibid., 30.

Marshall and his money are contributing to the violent discord among them. Even more subtle but more provocative are echoes in Marshall's film and Uys', not only because of N!ai's presence in both and the fighting scene they both share, but in their larger structures and shared themes--the comparison of the Ju/'hoansi of past life in relative peace and their painful contemporary life. Marshall even includes a church scene in which N!ai scoffs, albeit with good humor, at the story of the Samaritan woman at the well: "How can a woman go down in a water hole with a perfect stranger calling himself God's son?... That man was fooling her." Marshall's Tshumkwe may be very different than Uys', but the gods are still crazy.

Even as N!ai displays an attitude of trust toward to the camera, her behavior suggests that the differences between Marshall and Uys may not matter to her. Like the mother of the man from Ireli, N!ai rejects the camera with performative lament: "Death mocks me. Death dances with me. Don't look at my face." If Rouch saw the camera as a catalyst, N!ai suggests that it can also be a curse. Behind the beautiful things that draw Marshall's attention ---N!ai's beauty, Ju/'hoansi arts, crafts, and dances--lies the suggestion that it is no coincidence that what is filmed becomes vulnerable, that what it displays in abundance will dry up.

* * *

A Kalahari Family

In his final film series, *A Kalahari Family*, as Marshall addresses more directly the question of tourism and his own responsibility for plight of the Ju/'hoansi, we see him take up the role of elegist more explicitly. *A Kalahari Family,* a six-hour documentary series in five parts that were recorded over several years, bears witness to the almost total destruction of the Ju/'hoansi, whose quality of life has continued to deteriorate as their popularity as a tourist attraction has grown. As an expedition guide tells Marshall, "there are film companies which

would pay a fortune just to have the right to [film them].” Yet the Ju/'hoansi, with help from John Marshall and the development foundation he set up for the Ju/'hoansi in 1980, had transitioned to a livelihood of agriculture and livestock-- the antithesis of the romantic “bushman” life of *The Gods Must Be Crazy*. Having passed the leadership of his development fund into other hands, Marshall returned from the United States to find the foundation has become a major player in brokering access to the Ju/'hoansi, alongside other international organizations like the World Wildlife Foundation and the U.S. Agency for International Development. By working hand-in-glove with the tourism industry and stymying local Ju/'hoansi political organizations, Marshall’s own foundation has successfully intimidated many the Ju/'hoansi off their farmlands and onto a “nature” reserve where tourists pay to watch them hunt and gather.

Though Marshall’s camera is trained on government officials and smuggled into off-the-record foundation meetings, *A Kalahari Family* is also his *mea culpa*, starting small and building into a more serious self-recrimination. In Part 1 of *A Kalahari Family,* Marshall remembers ≠Oma Stumpy Tsamkxao with an interview with him before his death. ≠Oma Stumpy Tsamkxao tells teasing stories about John’s childish mistakes, how he almost missed the definitive shot of the giraffe falling in *The Hunters*, how he fell asleep too close to a fire and nearly burned himself, how his snores kept everyone else awake, and how he got tangled up his underwear in front of a hyena. N!ai later tells a story about how Marshall had foolishly tried to film a puff adder and how she, only a child, had to save him. “Hunters are always learning,” ≠Oma Stumpy Tsamkxao tells him sympathetically.

Yet we see that among the Ju/'hoansi, there is a lingering resentment of the Marshalls, whose part in their misfortune remains a point of contention. We see archival footage of an

argument regarding John's father Laurence between ≠Oma Stumpy Tsamkxao and another man about Laurence's role in a particular conflict: ≠Oma Stumpy Tsamkxao defends Laurence ("if it weren't for Old Marshall...") while another one curses him ("screw old Marshall!"). In the present, John is accused of enriching himself while the Ju/'hoansi suffer, since filming is known to be lucrative, and even Tsamkxao ≠Oma, ≠Oma Stumpy Tsamkxao's son, stops trusting Marshall and turns against his advice, but the assignment of blame hinges on the interpretation of a complicated chain of events and forces, some of which happened decades ago that few people still living observed firsthand. Marshall explains that the roads his family built "opened up Nyae Nyae," destroying "the remoteness that had protected the Ju/'hoansi and preserved their independence." Marshall explains what happened after the roads were built and the Marshalls went back home to America:

> Throughout the 1950s the economy of South West Africa expanded rapidly. New roads opened thousands of square miles of land for white ranchers. The original hunter-gatherer inhabitants were rounded up and forced to work without pay on the new ranches. But the ranchers needed still more unpaid workers. They wanted the people they called "Wild Bushmen" who were living independently in Nyae Nyae. While we were home in America, white ranchers followed our tracks into Nyae Nyae to round up the Ju/'hoansi by persuasion or force. When my father and I got back to Nyae Nyae, my Big Name, ≠Oma [Stumpy Tsamkxao], told us the story.

As an older generation passes away, new perspectives on the history of the Ju/'hoansi's exploitation emerge, and John has begun to see this history in a new light. If *N!ai* hinted that Marshall is no innocent party, *A Kalahari Family* tries to excavate his wrongdoing within a complex chain of historical forces to avoid repeating these mistakes in the present.

In trying to understand and undo the history of the Ju/'hoansi's oppression, Marshall relies on his longstanding relationship with the Ju/'hoansi and the footage which documents it. The second film in the series opens with an extended sequence showing Marshall's homecoming

in the Ju/'hoansi community. The time and detail devoted to these reunions suggest Marshall's dedication to rebuilding these relationships and regaining the trust of his subjects. The Ju/'hoansi community itself has shrunk: many have died, but many others have been scattered by decades of political and economic instability. Marshall proposes that they use his old footage to identify people who were lost, using it to inquire about people who might have been abducted to work for the ranchers. This strategy proves effective, and in one of the most moving scenes from the series, Gao, the former star of *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, tracks down his long-lost brother.[149] Like Rouch, Marshall sees a potential to directly intervene in his subjects' lives, to use technology to reunite people with their loved ones, and, in this particular instance, it works.

Marshall's larger goal in reuniting Ju/'hoansi friends and families is to help them resettle and organize into a cooperative. By achieving political recognition, Marshall and the Ju/'hoansi hope to better protect their livelihoods and ultimately help their families stay together. In this objective, they have little lasting success. Marshall tries to use his own footage to show the land that the Ju/'hoansi should own by right, land that they want to farm, but the development foundation uses this same footage to support their claim that their nature preserve will support the Ju/'hoansi hunting and gathering lifestyle, even though the Ju/'hoansi abandoned hunting and gathering decades ago. Marshall films farms and gardens and wells of the Ju/'hoansi to prove that their livelihoods have changed, but his influence in the world of international development is minimal, and his objections to the foundation's priorities are merely tolerated. In the final installment of *A Kalahari Family,* Marshall returns to find the foundation has let the wells they service for the Ju/'hoansi fall into disrepair. Ju/'hoansi farms have completely dried up and the livestock have died. Eight years prior, Marshall had filmed the garden of a man named G?kao

[149] This anecdote is also testament to the inaccessibility of popular "bushmen" ethnographies to the San themselves. Gao enjoyed a brief but significant celebrity after *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, but his own brother apparently never saw his image.

dabe, and he now films him on the now barren land where it used to be. Marshall superimposes an image of G?kao dabe's formerly lush crops over him as he rages, "I should be eating corn right now!" Even the baobab dedicated to ≠Oma Stumpy Tsamkxao has died from an infection and collapsed [Figure 17]. Marshall's archival footage ultimately loses its role asserting an accurate record of the past and is reduced to a ceremonial role: that of an elegy.

Figure 17

We might see Marshall's career as a long exercise in recursivity, each film correcting the unintentional consequences of the last but always creating new ones, until Marshall is finally betrayed by humanitarianism that has motivated his career from its beginning. Though Marshall does not dwell on the psychic dimensions of his dilemma, he emerges as a tragic figure alongside those he is mourning, a filmmaker in his sixties mourning not only his mentors but also their children. Unlike *N!ai, Portrait of a !Kung Woman*, *A Kalahari Family* finally forces us to see the faces of children who died from starvation and illness. Though Marshall still uses the practice of ritual healing as a visual metaphor for mourning, in *A Kalahari Family,* "half-death" is no longer simply an expression of mourning, but an act that reflects Marshall's impotence back to him. Observing /Gunda in the act of healing, Marshall asks: "In a world of change, did he still believe he could protect the people from unseen evil?" Though Marshall emphasizes traditional healing's

futility, he admires the bravery of the healers who face the spirits of the dead. In *N!ai, Portrait of a !Kung Woman*, N!ai told us about her fear of the healers with their terrifying expressions, yet now N!ai, as a much older woman, "dare[s] to enter the half-death where so many feared to go." In another moment, !U, the wife of Tsamkxao tells Marshall: "It was a long time before you looked at death, Long Face. You didn't want to know about Death." Taken as a whole, *A Kalahari Family* depicts a painfully personal experience of loss and hubris. A bystander in his own film, Marshall helplessly watches years of good intentions unravel around him. Long guided by a conviction that advocacy, investment, and technology could save the Ju/'hoansi, Marshall ultimately acknowledges that they were among the agents of their suffering.

* * *

If Marshall was dogged by hubris for much of his career, by an unshakeable faith in the humanitarian project and his agency within it, Rouch might be seen as in the thrall of the camera's power, as if the celestial alignment of camera and subject would never fail to produce a miracle. Whether believing in their power over the camera or the camera's power over them, Rouch and Marshall produced romantic visions of popular ethnographic filmmaking and of the ethnographic encounter. I have argued that the elegiac mode in popular ethnography is always an attempt to re-humanize, a desire for the bonds of friendship and family formed in the ethnographic encounter to erase the conditions of imperialism that enable them. If elegiac ethnography fails to rescue the human from the degraded and dehumanized ethnographic body of the 19th century, its romantic project never founders; it only takes new form.

What Marshall and Rouch witnessed toward the end of their careers was a new era of ethno-tourism inspired by the ethnographic encounter. If Marshall's early films played an

important role in marketing the Ju/'hoansi and inspiring a nascent tourism industry, Rouch would become a critical link in the Dogon tourism industry later in his career.

* * *

Conclusion: Affective Ethno-Tourism and the Question of Restitution

At the beginning of this chapter, I suggested that *Life*'s rendering of the Dogon's request for Griaule's exhumation functions both as popular farce and colonial propaganda, at once mocking Dogon claims on Griaule's body and consigning the violence at the heart of Griaule's career to history. Yet for the Dogon who organized Griaule's funeral, this media attention was part of a coordinated strategy to ensure their access to Griaule's legacy. According to Gaetano Ciarcia, "the affection which Griaule had long displayed toward "his" Dogon was, at the moment of his death, interpreted as a guarantee for the future."[150] For the occasion of the *dama*,[151] it was a group of Dogon leaders who, in collaboration with government officials, sent invitations to media outlets.[152] The ceremony to which the media was treated emphasized not only the bonds of affection between Griaule and the Dogon, but the requests for assistance made in Griaule's name.[153] A spokesperson for the *hogon* of Arou, a major religious figure for the Dogon, stressed that a replacement for Griaule must come to the cliffs to carry on his projects, which included, he

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[150] "...[l]'affection longtemps affichée par Griaule vis-à-vis de "ses" Dogan est interprétée, au moment de sa mort...comme un gage pour l'avenir." Gaetano Ciarcia, *De la mémoire ethnographique: l'exotisme du pays dogon* (Paris: Editions de l'Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2003), 125. Trans. my own.

[151] The *dama* is the ceremony where the bodies of people who have died in an approximately five-year period are brought out from the tomb in order to send them to definitively join their ancestors. Henley, *The Adventure of the Real*, 226.

[152] I am careful here to distinguish, as Ciarcia does, between the interests of a small group of Dogon leaders and the Dogon population as a whole. Ciarcia suggests that "Dogon" participation in Griaule's legacy was largely the project of a group of elites who were able to use Griaule's legacy to consolidate local power.

[153] One particularly strong example mentioned by Ciarcia comes from Paul Hazoumé, the Beninese writer and ethnologist whose essay "Marcel Griaule, l'Africain" asserts that Griaule was "célébrées, selon leurs coutumes religieuses par les 'Dogons', qui l'aimaient tant, achevèrent de nous convaincre qu'ils le reconnaissaient comme un des leurs." The essay appeared in a 1957 collection of essays from l'Assemblée de I'Union Française and UNESCO. Ciarcia, *De la mémoire ethnographique*, 127. Orig.: *Marcel Griaule, conseiller de l'Union française*, ed. Maurice Demarle (Paris, Editions Latines, 1957), 175.

notes, improving residents' access to water.[154] Yet the appearance of optimism and trust should not be mistaken for naiveté, as *Life* does. To the contrary, "l'épisode du 'prélèvement" --the "sampling" of ritual objects during the Dakar-Djibouti Mission -- was never forgotten among the Dogon, and Ciarcia tells us it is an incident which "is remembered by the notables of [the Dogon village of] Songho in order to illustrate the fame of their village and to signal the existence of the debt incurred by the West."[155] Far from forgetting Griaule's legacy and relinquishing their claims to Griaule's body, Dogon leaders saw the funeral for Griaule as an opportunity to reinterpret their relationship to French ethnography to their advantage, a way to make elegy their own prerogative.

From this perspective, Jean Rouch's role among the Dogon was key because he was the inheritor of Griaule's legacy. As we have seen, Rouch struggled to explain his relationship to the Dogon, contrasting it with his close personal relationship to his Nigerien colleagues, but in Ciarcia's interpretation, Dogon leaders--despite deploying the language of personal affection to describe their ties to Griaule--viewed theirs as an institutional relationship, with Griaule merely serving as its representative. Rouch was, in Ciarcia's words, "the media-centric site which thoroughly reflected the manners, spirit, and the consequences of Griaulienne ethnology."[156] Yet here we also glimpse Rouch's secondary function: his role as a popular filmmaker. Ciarcia suggests that, much like Rouch, many Dogon had an optimistic view of the power of the camera: "The camera's eye, before which, for the Dogon too, the real is no longer what it was, opens the

[154] This address to Griaule's relatives and the representatives of the French state was published in the same volume as the previously mentioned homage from Senghor: "Le service rendu au pays dogon par Griaule est immense, mais il avait aussi des projets à réaliser: Il voulait de l'eau pour les villages qui en sont dépourvus ... Les Dogon sont donc inquiets appris la disparition du Professeur Griaule et s'interrogent en se demandant: 'Qui remplacera Monsieur Griaule?" De Ganay, ed., "Hommage dogon à Marcel Griaule," *Ethnologiques,* XLI. Also qtd. in Ciarcia, *De la mémoire ethnographique*, 277.

[155] "...est rappelé par les notables de Songho pour illustrer la notoriété de leur village et pour signaler l'existence d'une dette contractée par le monde occidental." Ciarcia, *De la mémoire ethnographique*, 159.

[156] "...le lieu médiatique où se reflétèrent sans réserve les manières, l'esprit et les retombées de l'ethnologie griaulienne." Ibid., 77.

possibility of routes of restitutions and voluntary reconstructions."[157] If their apparent affection for Griaule humanized the Dogon for a Western audience, Rouch's camera dramatized Dogon life, bringing the notoriety that made it possible to build and sustain an entire industry of ethnographic tourism.[158] In praising Griaule, Rouch and the Dogon found a common interest, and they praised Rouch in turn after he passed away and received his own Dogon funerary rites.[159] Bloom writes that the "continued commemorative rituals in Rouch's honor held in Niamey...and in Mali, as last surviving member [sic] of the once powerful French ethnographic kinship network anchored by Marcel Griaule, reveals a certain social investment and dependency upon the ethnographic archival imaginary." What was treated as an affective relationship in popular ethnography was translated by the Dogon into the tradition of praise, which, as Bloom points out, "has become a means by which to reinforce a tourist economy that has developed around the popularity of ethnography as niche tourism."[160]

As Bloom indicates, staging Griaule's funeral as a media event afforded Dogon leaders a measure of participation in shaping for themselves an internationally-recognizable ethnographic identity; yet with this status comes a new relationship to international tourism. In 1989, UNESCO named the Bandiagara cliffs a World Heritage site.[161] In theory, the goal in implementing this site was to "humaniser le tourisme," in the words of the National Director of the Department of Arts and Culture Soumaila Diakité.[162] In practice, preparing the cliffs to become a World Heritage site was a struggle of different interests (UNESCO, the Malian

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[157] "L'œil de la caméra devant lequel, pour les Dogan aussi, le réel n'est plus ce qu'il était, ouvre la possibilité de routes des restitutions et reconstructions volontaires. Sans doute participa-t-il puissamment à la mise en spectacle de leur tradition par les Dogon eux-mêmes." Ibid.
[158] Ibid., 74-76.
[159] Rouch's funeral was held in December of 2006 in the village of Tyogou. Henley, *The Adventure of the Real,* 240.
[160] Peter J. Bloom, "Unraveling the Ethnographic Encounter: Institutionalization and Scientific Tourism in the œuvre of Jean Rouch," *French Forum* 35, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 86.
[161] Ciarcia, *De la mémoire ethnographique*, 128.
[162] Ibid. 132.

government, and the Dogon) and opposing objectives, namely allowing tourists access to the Dogon and the cliffs while preserving and "maintaining a Dogon population on site."[163] What was ultimately created was a "ceinture de protection" that defined the Dogon people by latitude and longitude, with one village outside the belt designated as a "satellite" site due to its cave paintings.[164] In this fragmented geography that maps both the topographical and the human, we might read a multi-layered history of popular ethnography: an *in situ* enclosure optimized for a class of global tourists, the product of a long marriage of humanism and biopower, one which continues to strive for the simultaneous preservation and visibility of the ethnographic subject.

A similar transition has taken place among the San in the last few decades, though we might see it foreshadowed in Marshall's *N!ai: The Story of a !Kung Woman*. In this film, Marshall mentions that the !Kung have identified more than 90 previously-unknown edible species of plants. In 1996, as John and Jean Comaroff write, the San community successful bid for the intellectual property rights of the *hoodia* plant, called *xhoba*, an appetite suppressant with appeal for pharmaceutical companies, and that it was partly through the process of acquiring collective, cultural property that the different ethnicities that were once called "bushmen" began to understand themselves as part of the San. The San, the Comaroffs argue, are incentivized by global markets to practice a "legible form of primordialism."[165] Despite the fact that much of their history as a collectivity has been one of the erasure of their customs and languages, their survival now depends on retrieving and deploying this heritage as a marketable asset. This task has been administered largely through the hospitality industry, luxury resorts and reservations where tourists can come to be instructed by the San on indigenous hunting techniques and arrow-

[163] Ibid., 131.
[164] Ibid., 132.
[165] Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, "A Tale of Two Ethnicities," *Ethnicity, Inc.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 94.

fashioning, to be guided by the San on what was once their land, and to hear their stories, much as Marshall and his family did nearly seventy years ago.

As I have tried to show, the demand for "sensitive" popular ethnography has never been separate from the market for consumer goods, and that with the humanizing of ethnography comes also the contingency of the human. The basic welfare of the Dogon and the San are more or less dependent on their identity which is now "inséparablement ethnologique et touristique."[166] One could claim that the Dogon, much like the San, are able to assume roles in their respective tourism industries, roles that permit them to share, to some degree, in their profitability. One might hope that the personal encounters promoted by contemporary tourism contain the potential for meaningful, transformative exchange (whether personal, cultural, or financial). However, we must also question, as Malian intellectuals like Issiaka Tembine, Adam Ba Konare, Orissa Diakite have, "the perverse effects of the mediatization of Dogon culture"[167] and whether these market structures have transformed people into consumable anthropological experiences. Bloom is pessimistic, suggesting rather that "the vice grip of affect transforms the social dynamic itself and is held captive by the influx of hard currency."[168] To believe that the affective encounter can dissolve the context in which it is embedded is to perform again the romantic tropes which have long given popular ethnographies their mass appeal.

The cultivation of a Dogon community sustained by a tourist economy recalls what Bloom calls "retroactive" humanitarianism: a humanitarianism which "justifies economic exploitation by finding the cure to the effects of colonial intervention."[169] For Bloom, this is

[166] Ciarcia, *De la mémoire ethnographique*, 128.
[167] Ibid., 137.
[168] Bloom, "Unraveling the Ethnographic Encounter," 88.
[169] Bloom, *French Colonial Documentary,* viii.

merely a way of "laundering" guilt.[170] As we have seen in this chapter, Rouch and Marshall endow the ethnographic archive with redemptive and restitutional power; in the meticulously conserved and reanimated film waits a miracle of time regained. Yet cinema cannot return us to a time when the value of the ethnographic subject's life was self-evident, nor can it undo the processes of dehumanization that have underwritten the ethnographic archive from its inception. What these images do accomplish is a deferral, the notion, to paraphrase Susan Sontag, that an excruciating fastidiousness may one day permit the mute past to speak in its own voice.[171] To what extent does the archive represent a space which, in its sublime infinitude of meaning and memory, can shield us from ethical intervention in the past and present? Does the endless possibility of the archive shelter us in the same logic as the *Confessions*, that "one cannot judge me until they have read me"?[172] Rouch and Marshall's use of the ethnographic film archive suggests, as Rony argues, that the ethnographic filmmaker has always been cast an "agent of redemption, but [who] can only really save the West."[173] The ethnographic archive need not always comfort rather than unsettle. Filmmakers like Jean Marie Teno and John Akomfrah appropriate the archive not to, as Awam Amkpa describes it, "simply highlight a binary of colonial dystopia and postcolonial utopias." Rather they strive to create "a plural and overlapping modernity too complex and capacious to be defined by a singular utopia..."[174] Films

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[170] Ibid., ix.

[171] Sontag's original sentence, which I shorten here, refers to Benjamin's "collector": "But what in Benjamin is an excruciating idea of fastidiousness, meant to permit the mute past to speak in its own voice...becomes--when generalized, in photography….the fabrication of a new parallel reality...that transforms the present into the past and the past into pastness." Susan Sontag, "Melancholy Objects," *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1977) 177.

[172] Qtd.in Leiris, *L'Afrique Fantôme*, 11. Orig. Rousseau, *The Confessions*, 29.

[173] Rony, *The Third Eye*, 138.

[174] Awam Amkpa, "Colonial Photography and Outlaws of History," *African Photography From the Walther Collection: Distance and Desire: Encounters with the African Archive*, ed. Tamar Garb (New York: Walther Collection, 2013), 249.

like Teno's *Afrique, Je Te Plumerai* (1992) and Akomfrah's *Nine Muses* exemplify the ways in which the archive can be made into a site of resistance and retroactive identity formation.

In the course of examining elegy and sentiment in the ethnographic relationship, this chapter has traced major events and filmmakers in the development of popular ethnography as well as the notion of the ethnographic film archive as restitution for ethnographic subjects. The emergence of filmmakers like Rouch and Marshall in the late fifties and early sixties coincides with what Debaene has called "a new phase of [French anthropology], one that was marked particularly by a rivalry over the monopoly of "true" knowledge produced about "natives."[175] As anthropology slowly began to yield to voices from the colonies, new spaces opened up for participation from subjects like the Dogon and the San. A demand for "African" knowledge and cultural production fueled an investment in African literature and media, and ethnographic film began to share its infrastructure of funding and distribution with African films like *Afrique sur Seine*. Yet in the act of contributing to and contesting a long history of ethnography--particularly popular ethnography--about themselves, ethnographic subjects had to confront the fact that their bids for authority were predicated on ethnographic concepts of cultural identity and authenticity, concepts long represented through elegiac tropes.

[175] Debaene, *Far Afield*, 281.

Chapter 2

To Stare With Equality: Africa, Elegy, and the Essay Film

"The short film was struggling to stay alive. Today, its death has been decided…Its death will finally be that of cinema, because an art that doesn't move dies." In 1953, in response to a French decree which discouraged the production of short films, an association of filmmakers and critics calling themselves the Group of Thirty[176] published a manifesto predicting cinema's death and mourning its loss. Inexpensive and accessible to non-professionals, the short film was the preferred format of the avant-garde, as it afforded filmmakers the freedom to experiment without regard for commercial viability. The Group of Thirty argued that their shorts were the lifeblood of cinema and that their success should be a source of national pride in a dismal postwar climate. But the short film's precarity had little to do with its length or its national profile. Its vulnerability to censorship and repression stemmed from its radical politics, particularly its association with the growing anti-colonial movement.

Postwar French film was eager to prove it could treat the serious political and intellectual issues of the day. Out of the short film came the essay film, a format driven as much by its ideas as its sense of moral and social purpose. The essay film embraced topics which made it particularly susceptible to government interference: the war, the Holocaust, the struggle for independence in Algeria, and independence movements in French West Africa. After smuggling footage out of the colonies, René Vautier served jail time to bring French audiences shocking images of colonial violence that he captured in his *Afrique 50* (1950). But films like *Afrique 50* went beyond reportage. The essay film's insights were to develop out of the experiential, from

[176] "*Groupe des trentes*" was a reference to maximum length the Group considered a short film. In 1953, the French government had promoted the "double-feature" format at the expense of the shorts and documentaries that had frequently accompanied feature films. "Declaration of the Group of Thirty," *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures*, trans. Scott MacKenzie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 462.

the constantly unfolding dynamic between the filmmaker and the world. In a postwar climate suspicious of propaganda and truth claims,[177] the essay film was to show that film could capture "a dialogue of ideas,"[178] an exchange not only between a filmmaker and his audience, but within the film itself. This dialogue could be generated in the relationship between images, between sounds and images, and of course, in the relationship between the filmmaker and his subjects. But what was significantly *under*-theorized in the emerging concept of the essay film was the relationship between this dialogic engagement and the African settings in which they so often took place.

Timothy Corrigan has speculated that the anti-colonial and postcolonial themes in the essay film can be seen as an extension of the elegiac mood that consumed the essay film at its inception, against the backdrop of World War II:

> That the watershed years of the essay film are 1940-1945 also reminds us that failure, crisis, and trauma often become the experiential base of the essayistic. That many of the most charged essay films regularly return to the experience of the colonial and postcolonial historically broadens and builds on those crises as the often-dangerous and fragile base of the essayistic, a questioning and rethinking of self that partly explains the attraction of the essay to policially, sexually, socially, and racially marginalized persons.[179]

In trying to understand the relationship of the self to historical crisis, the essay film explores the subjective experience of social catastrophe, particularly expressions of guilt, frustration, helplessness, and failure. Yet unlike modern elegiac poetry, generally skeptical on the question of healing from historical trauma, the essay film in Africa suggests that something hopeful lies at the intersection between the postcolonial and elegiac. Rather than look to the modern elegy to understand the elegiac dynamics at work in these essay films, I suggest we consult Peter Sack's

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[177] Thomas Elsaesser, "The Essay Film: From Film Festival Favorite to Flexible Commodity Form?" in *Essays on the Essay Film*, Eds. Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 243.
[178] Timothy Corrigan, *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) 51.
[179] Ibid, 33.

model of the classical elegy. Stressing the importance of inheritance, Sack's approach allows us to ask questions about the relationship between mourner and mourned, as well as questions of legacy, power, and redemption.

In the following chapter, I consider five essay films, each of which poses questions about the viability of African institutions after colonialism: the viability of African art, of African democracy, African cinema, the African nation, as well as traditional forms of knowledge and expertise. Yet in posing these questions of *African* viability, these essays, I would like to suggest, displace onto Africa the question of the viability of the avant-garde. At the same time, I insist that Africa's presence in these films is not trivial. I contend that Africa became a key concept by which the avant-garde reinforced its aesthetic legacy, both in time and over geographic space. If the avant-garde understood that its anti-colonial politics put their movement at risk, it also recognized its potential to preserve it. By allowing the avant-garde to articulate and administer its mission on a global scale, anti-colonial politics could help the avant-garde cement its global legacy.

What happens when Africa becomes the staging ground for the essay film's dialogic experiment? In trying to make films that reflected their egalitarian principles and politics, film essayists found themselves deeply invested in the possibility of an egalitarian encounter between filmmaker and filmed. When it fails to produce this utopian encounter, the essay film is driven instead by the clash between the controlling hand of the filmmaker-*auteur* and his unruly and unpredictable subjects, a conflict that echoes the reluctant retreat of the colonizer, and perhaps, the avant-garde's insistence on the postcolonial embrace of the avant-garde. Tracing the essay film in Africa over the latter half of the 20th century, from Marker and Resnais' *Les Statues meurent aussi/Statues Also Die* (1953), to Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Appunti per un'Orestiade*

Africana/*Notes for an African Orestes* (1970), to Peter Kubelka's *Unsere Afrikareise/Our Trip to Africa* (1973), Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil/Sunless* (1983), and Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Reassemblage: From the Firelight to the Screen* (1983), I will show that just as Africa serves as a space of projection for the the avant-garde, so too does the figure of a postcolonial filmmaker. Always on her way yet never arriving, the postcolonial filmmaker is a repository of the avant-garde's utopian dreams, tasked with restoring wholeness and equality to an aesthetic in crisis.

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Hubris and Modesty: The Origins of the Essay Film

Though essay-like films have have existed nearly as long as cinema itself,[180] the term "essay film" ("essai cinematographique") did not come into currency until the mid-1950s in France, bolstered by an emerging concept of writerliness in cinema. Several years before the Group of Thirty published their manifesto, one of its signatories, Alexandre Astruc, published an essay called "The Birth of the New Avant-Garde: The *Caméra-Stylo*" (1948). In it, Astruc proposed a new mechanics of meaning production in cinema, one that centers on the notion of the filmmaker as an *auteur*, or author. Astruc recast the camera as a tool for *generating* images, sounds, and ideas, rather than passively capturing them: "After having been successively a fairground attraction, an amusement analogous to boulevard theatre, or the means of preserving the images of an era, [film] is gradually becoming a language."[181] By touting film's ability to express abstract concepts and complex relationships between ideas as language could, Astruc hoped to sever cinema's historical links both to documentation and mass exhibition. Using the camera as a pen (the *caméra-stylo),* filmmakers would emancipate cinema from the "tyranny of

[180] Timothy Corrigan notes D.W. Griffith's *A Corner in Wheat* (1909) and Dziga Vertov's unfinished adaptation of Marx's *Capital*, among others. Corrigan, *The Essay Film,* 3.
[181] Astruc, "The Birth of a New Avant Garde," in *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures,* 604.

[the] visual,"[182] and, Astruc hoped, ensure cinema's place alongside France's distinguished literary tradition. Astruc writes, "From today onwards, it will be possible for the cinema to produce works which are equivalent, in their profundity and meaning, to the novels of Faulkner and Malraux, to the essays of Sartre and Camus."[183] In staking a claim for cinema's literary inheritance and demanding the recognition and authority that came with authorship, Astruc aimed to rectify what he and others saw as cinema's marginal status relative to French literary and philosophical traditions.

In another essay from 1948, "The Future of Cinema," Astruc articulates an even more grandiose vision of film auteurism, comparing its power to the creation and destruction of worlds. Astruc argues that although cinema has always been a trivialized, marginalized art, an art "born gagged"[184] (a reference to silent film), filmmakers should feel emboldened to assert themselves through their art. For Astruc, to control "[a] machine that reads ….the totality of things," the camera, is a godlike power to control, one which:

> pumps directly from that universe the most formidable vocabulary that an artist has, until now, had at his disposition, human reality dancing on the stage of the universe the ballets of our imagination, the rocks ground and reinstalled following another order, and then we are God, because we remake in our image all of creation, the camera-pen, the art where the entire universe is our medium...[185]

Wielding the divine power to manipulate all material being, the auteur, Astruc argues, should claim the full extent of territory that rightfully belongs to cinema. Astruc's is a project of expansion, of conquest, the right to stake a claim for cinema beyond "[t]he little domain that was allotted to it."[186] If Astruc's brashness is melodrama, a self-conscious pose, it nevertheless

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[182] Ibid, 604.
[183] Ibid, 606.
[184] Astruc, "The Future of Cinema," in *Essays on the Essay Film*, Eds. Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017). 94.
[185] Ibid, 100.
[186] Ibid, 95.

speaks to the scale of auteurist cinema's ambitions. "There is a time for modesty, but there is also one for hubris,"[187]Astruc writes.

Developing out of the same cultural currents that produced Astruc's auteurism, the essay film shares much of auteurism's origin story. Auteurs and film essayists were largely the same group of people; the filmmakers who made essay films overwhelmingly identified as auteurs, and though films generally associated with auteurist cinema tend more towards linearity and narrativity than the essay film, auteurist cinema and the essay film affirmed many of the same principles. Both fundamentally understood film as a vehicle for ideas, and located their capacity for generating complex meaning in the editing process. But the essay film distinguished itself from the auteur film in one essential way. Where auteurist cinema emphasized the dominant signature of the auteur, the film essay underscored the dialogic relationship between the filmmaker's contribution and those of his subjects. Timothy Corrigan describes the film essayist as a figure who continually remakes him or herself in relation to the world and the subjects he or she encounters: "Embedded within the textual action of the film, [the essayist] becomes the product of changing experiential expressions rather than simply the producer of expressions."[188] Where the auteur emphasizes his power to grind rocks into dust and reconstitute them, the essayist stresses the need to nurture the environment in front of the camera, to foster in his images "a type of recursiveness, where images are able to comment on themselves…[and so can] enact strategies of displacement, irony, plurivocality…"[189] If auteurism's raison d'être was authorial control, the film essay was an experiment in relinquishing some of that power, in giving one's subjects the power to shape their own representation.

[187] Ibid., 100.
[188] Corrigan, *The Essay Film*, 31.
[189] Elsaesser, "The Essay Film," 242.

Thus the challenge of the essay film is not only to address injustice in the world, but to try to rectify it within the film, by including the voices of its subjects--often marginalized, colonized, traumatized subjects--into the film itself. Thomas Elsaesser characterizes the problem in Marker's *Sans Soleil* as a difficulty of lending the filmmaker's voice to his subjects: "How to give voice to human beings, whom the circumstances of their lives or, more often the terrible history of the twentieth century had scarred into almost irrecoverable silence. The question, then, becomes how to get closer to human beings as subjects, to listen to them, while actually lending *to* them his--that is, the writer's-- own voice."[190] This process of approaching, listening, responding and speaking on the subject's behalf takes on a unique form in the essay film. Unlike the sustained, ethnographic relationships we saw in Chapter 1, the essay film rejects the forms of expertise that documentary and ethnography offer, instead celebrating the brief, chance encounter. Because this interaction takes place in public space with a filmmaker who is nearly always male, the incorporation of female subjects presents a particular challenge. With the male subjects who do speak, the practice of "listening" to them tends strongly toward the visual rather than the aural or verbal. Questions of translation trouble the essay film, and more often than not, the interlocutor is reduced to pure sound and the physical fact of their presence. The solution the essay film offers to these considerable challenges, deeply rooted in social and political problems, is largely formal. The film essayist emphasizes sensory experiences, fleeting details, and the subject's role in the overall composition of the frame in order to give meaning to the subjects whose role in the film is necessarily fleeting.

Under such conditions, can the encounter between filmmaker and the colonized subject be described as dialogic? Or does it merely affect an atmosphere of reciprocity and reflexivity? And if it is the latter, what is the purpose of this effect? To answer this question, we might look

[190] Ibid, 248.

to Edward Saïd's notion of the "valid interlocutor," a hypothetical figure who permits us to imagine productive dialogue with the colonized.[191] This hypothetical interlocutor, Saïd writes, is imagined to be one "found clamoring on the doorstep where … he or she has made so unseemly a disturbance as to be let in, guns or stones checked in with the porter, for further discussion." Implicit in the figure of the valid interlocutor is the presumption that he is waiting and eager to engage, that he accepts the terms of existing discourse, and that his contribution will not fundamentally change them. The imagined environment in which the interlocutor is welcomed has no specificity, an apparently neutral space which "derives from an almost entirely academic or theoretical environment, and suggests the calm as well as the antiseptic, controlled quality of a thought-experiment."

As much as the essay film, with its rich environments of the subject's own living and social spaces, can be said to differ from the hypothetical site of engagement that Saïd conjures, we must not overlook the space created by the camera itself. An invisible territory with its own laws, its own master, this cinematic space is structured, maintained, and controlled by an unseen industry of technologies--the editing suites of course, but also the blank, waiting screens on which the interlocutor's image will eventually be projected for audiences. By acknowledging the resonances between the essay film's African subject and Saïd's "valid interlocutor," we can begin to understand the utility of such a figure, a placeholder more than a person, a projection that serves a fantasy of colonial resolution and redemption.

This is not to claim that the filmmakers in question are unaware of such dynamics; to the contrary, it is the essayist's hyperconscious awareness of his failure to adequately represent his subjects that is at the heart of the essay film's elegiac tendencies. Born in response to mass

[191] Edward, Said, "Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors," *Critical Inquiry* 15, no.2 (1989), 209.

violence and global wars, when the end of poetry and art seemed to have already come, the essay film's burden is to bear witness to the irreparable human damage wrought by the modern age. Yet the nature of the essay film's elegiac nature is more complex than it first appears. Though modern elegy may be known for its melancholic failure to cope with the past, its tendency to "reopen the wounds of loss" rather than heal them,[192] classical elegy, as Peter Sacks reminds us, ensured the perpetuity of a legacy beyond death, securing a lineage and inheritance. "Few elegies can be fully read without an appreciation of their frequently combative struggles for inheritance,"[193] Sacks writes, citing Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, the same story Pasolini chooses to adapt in order tell the story of African modernity. Might we link the avant-garde's concerns about the viability of (Western) art and the viability of African modernity to an older elegiac tradition, one in which the opportunity to preside over a death gave one the power to determine what would take its place? If traditional African art and culture were deemed dead, what modern aesthetic practices will inherit them? Could the avant-garde ensure its legacy with the help of the modern African artist?

The anticipation of this African avant-garde, a thoroughly *modern* filmmaker or artist with whom dialogue could really be possible, remains a consistent theme in the essay film in Africa. This undercurrent of messianism might be traced to George Lukacs, whose theoretical influences on the modern essay and essay film are foundational. Lukacs describes the essayist as one "sent into the world"[194] to judge the value of things and make order out of chaos. But like every prophet, the true critic's judgements have to be borne out by time, authenticated by a

[192] Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1994), xi.
[193] Peter Sacks, "Interpreting the Genre: Elegy and the Work of Mourning," *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1985), 37.
[194] Georg Lukács, "On the Nature and Form of the Essay," in *Essays on the Essay Film*, Eds. Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 37.

follower, the only thing that guarantees the lasting impact of his work. The essay is authenticated by an acolyte who will take the essayist's judgments and "awake[n] them to life and action" but this follower is "one who is always about to arrive, the one who is never quite yet there." He remains anticipated until the moment of his arrival because the essay, for Lukacs, can only take shape around this future validation, without which it is meaningless: "And if the other does not come--is not the essayist then without justification? … it seems highly questionable whether, left entirely to himself--i.e., independent from the fate of that other of whom he is the herald--he could lay claim to any value or validity."[195]

To combat the overwhelming loss and failure of the modern age, the death of art and invention, the essay film in Africa awaited postcolonial redemption. Sartre attributed enormous historical potential to the advent of the postcolonial in 1948: "Strange and decisive turn: race is transmuted into historicity, the black present explodes and is temporalized, negritude—with its Past and its Future—is inserted into Universal History, it is no longer a state, nor even an existential attitude, it is a 'Becoming.'"[196] Much like Sartre, Resnais ends his apocalyptic *Guernica* (1950) with the confidence that one day, "innocence will overcome destruction."[197] Tormented by the mass death that created modern Europe, by doubt in its ability to continue its art, the European avant-garde hoped that assimilating the African future might save European modernity. Far from a meek or moderated response to auteurism's hubris, the essay film had its own grand ambitions. Not satisfied with liberating the auteur to create in total freedom, the essay film wanted to liberate the world it filmed, by enlisting the help of the liberated.

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[195] Ibid, 38.
[196] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Black Orpheus,* trans. John MacCombie, *The Massachusetts Review* 6, no. 1 (1964/1965), 47. *Orphée noir* originally appeared in the preface to *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue francais*, edited by Léopold Sédar Senghor, Paris, 1948.
[197] *Guernica*, directed by Alain Resnais and Robert Hessens, (1950; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eDeBu8HwUOw).

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Equality in the Present: *Statues Also Die*

In one of the most famous sequences of *Statues Also Die*, African masks look out from behind glass cases in the Musée de l'homme. French visitors pass by to examine them, but rather than take their point of view, the camera cuts to the perspective of the mask. The gaze in which we expected to participate is now the subject of ours: the visitors' puzzled, leering, or bored expressions are now on display. A mirror for the French museum-going spectator, the transparent glass reflects the unflattering likeness of French consumption of African art. In *Statues Also Die,* Resnais and Marker take us "behind the mask," asking us to imagine African sculptures as once animate beings, capable of confronting the French viewer with the suffering of the colonized. But what Marker and Resnais hope to show through this exercise, is the statues' lifelessness in the present, in their dissociation from the living world in which they once played a vital role. With their passing, Marker and Resnais suggest that we look ahead to a new African artist, a living one capable of "repairing the fabric of the world." In the following section, I argue that *Statues Also Die* shows us how the postwar avant-garde's commitment to equality could be pitted against its own aesthetic priorities, and that in their notion of an African artist to come, Marker and Resnais can only tolerate an artist in their own image, one who can satisfy the aesthetic preferences of the avant-garde.

Though generally classified as an essay film, *Statues Also Die* has much in common with the postwar art film. Steven Jacobs describes the explosion of the art film during this period, supported by organizations like UNESCO and the Fédération internationale des Archives du Film (FIAF)[198] as part of a program of cultural and educational reconstruction. Coinciding with

[198] Steven Jacobs, "Camera and Canvas: Emmer, Storck, Resnais and the Post-war Art Film," *Framing Pictures: Film and the Visual Arts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 4.

the rise of auteurism, the art film allowed filmmakers to explore what made film unique relative to other media,"a means to investigate the boundaries of film by juxtaposing movement versus stasis, narrative versus iconic images, and cinematic space versus pictorial surface.[199] Alain Resnais was well-known for his art films, which included *Van Gogh* (1948), *Malfray* (1948), *Chateaux de France* (1948), and *Gauguin* (1950). In 1950, he was commissioned by the literary magazine *Présence Africaine* to make *Statues Also Die*, along with a young journalist, Chris Marker, who had only just made his first film.[200] The film was to accompany an exhibition of African art and to explore the question: why is black art displayed in the ethnographic museum, while Greek and Egyptian art occupy the Louvre? For Marker and Resnais, the topic was a perfect confluence of their political and aesthetic interests, allowing them to marry an anti-colonial critique with a critique of institutionalized art.

The opening images of *Statues Also Die* allow us to imagine the fate of art in a world without museums. We see romantic images of ruins, sculptures abandoned in a forest, and statues in classical garb with weathered faces. Lost to history, these objects have no one to appreciate their former grandeur beyond the wild animals and the trees of the forest. If Marker and Resnais at first appear to be laying the groundwork to recognize the value of institutional conservation of art objects, they soon surprise us. In Marker and Resnais' complex analogy, it is the Western museum that is the wilderness, particularly when it comes to the display of art from the colonies. Held behind glass, stripped of the cultural contexts which gave it meaning, the African mask is as lost as the statues in the forest. For a European museum-goer, "the intentions of the black who created it, the emotions of the black who looks at it, all of that escapes us."[201]

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[199] Ibid, 31.

[200] Marker's first film was a documentary about the 1952 Olympic Games (*Olympia 52*).

[201] I use Lauren Ashby's translation of the voiceover in *Statues Also Die (*apart from a few minor changes I have made). Chris Marker and Lauren Ashby, "The Statues Also Die," *Art in Translation* 5, no. 1, (2013): 429-438.

The European museum, Marker and Resnais suggest, is a place for blindness rather than sight. Unable to appreciate their power and their beauty, the European viewer is as insensate to black art as the trees to the ruins in their midst.

Yet there is a way to see the art to which we are blind. Marker and Resnais show us what we are missing by way of an intermediary-- a black museum goer at the Musée de l'Homme. Looking into the face of this young woman, we are told that the mask inspires intense curiosity and pride. For her, the narrator reports, the mask is not a dead object, but the "face of a culture… the sign of a lost unity, where art was the guarantee of an agreement between man and world. It is the sign of this gravity which delivers her [the black visitor], beyond *métissage* and the slave ships, that ancient land of the ancestors, Africa." To truly see the mask, we are told, to be touched by the rich culture and the traumatic history which have deposited it here, we must experience it as an African does. Appreciating the power and beauty African art has lost by being held in a Western museum requires the appearance of an African, or, more precisely, the words and feelings attributed to her.

How to experience the lost grandeur of these objects, as this African woman appears to? Marker and Resnais transport us cinematically to a time when they still possessed it. Marker and Resnais use film to take us on imaginary journey through space and time, to help us imagine how these objects would have awed and intimated the first European travelers to the kingdom of Dahomey. Unlike the first mask we saw, isolated and enclosed, the next mask we see is set free from the glass case. The narrator falls silent, and the camera pans slowly across the casts of kings, attendants, and warriors that seem to form a stately procession. Lit with spotlights and accompanied by a score featuring woodwinds and percussion, most of these figures are smaller than life-size, but are made to fill the whole screen. Others are arranged as if they were still *in*

situ in the palace, flanking what we might imagine to be doorways or altars. Pairs of leopards are shown repeatedly [Figure 18], and though there is nothing unusual about showing them with the rest of the brass court art (leopards are a symbol of the *Oba*, the king), the prominence of these great cats in this sequence would seem to make them bear a new signature, that of Marker.[202] In trying to reflect the important roles these objects once played, Marker and Resnais also invest them with contemporary significance. The statues not only showcase the power of the camera but the sign of the auteur as well.

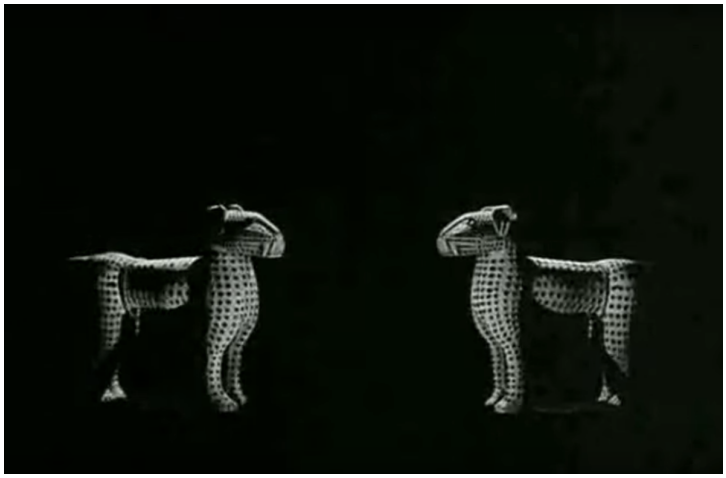

Figure 18

Having been given the perspective of the black museum-goer and the pre-colonial traveler, we now take the perspective of the statues themselves, imagining them as sentient figures capable of turning against their captors. As in the first scene, Marker and Resnais want us to imagine the statues as not just seen but seeing, witnessing, judging. As the sequence progresses, the casts become less architectural and increasingly anthropomorphized, focusing on individual faces and features. The *mise-en-scène* endows them with expression: they are seen in

[202] Marker was famous for his images of cats in nearly every one of his films, often using cats as his avatar. In 1953, however, Marker's association with cats was not yet established, though he was already writing on cats among many other topics in the journal *Esprit* (See Michael Chaiken and Sam Diiorio, "The Author Before the Auteur: Pre-Marker Marker," *Film Comment* 39 no.4 (July/August 2003): 42-43).

closeup and extreme closeup, and occasionally in a two-shot, as if in conversation with each other. A malevolent mood begins to build: woodwinds trill, the piano and drum mark time slowly and ominously, and the shot length becomes shorter, building to a climax. We see increasingly extreme closeups: sharpened teeth and bulbous, wide pupilless eyes, like menacing, murderous spirits. A deeply-sculpted group holds a sacrificial goat at the moment of slaughter [Figure 19], while an expressionless royal altarpiece looks on. Through the concept of the living statue, Marker and Resnais express a desire for a powerful antithesis to colonialism, even one with the power to mete out righteous but perhaps restorative justice.

Figure 19

Yet as the title of the film suggests, these statues are no longer "living," according to the logic of Marker and Resnais' extended metaphor. Snatched away from the communities that made and used them, these objects are "dead": they no longer have any significant role in the present. Stripped of religious, ceremonial, or quotidian purpose by colonization and museumification, their purpose is purely formal. Yet it is precisely their forms which hold significance for Marker and Resnais. Using the conventions of the art film, the filmmakers use light, shadow, and movement to direct our gaze to various points of interest, while the narrator

provides commentary: “This overflow of creation...is an overflow of imagination: it is freedom, turning of the sun, flower knot, water curve, fork of the trees, one after the other. The techniques are mixed, the wood subtly imitates the fabric, the fabric takes its motifs from the earth.” Guided by the camera-as-critic, Marker and Resnais suggest, these “dead” statues in fact contain an abundance of meaning. The narrator tells us that this “creation has no limits, that everything communicates, and that, from its planets to its atoms, this world of rigour comprises in its turn the world of beauty.” If Marker and Resnais seem to be twisting us into metaphoric knots, the key is to see this interplay of opposites--dead and alive, empty and full, mute and voluble--not as contradictions, but the crux of their argument. The life and history that animated these forms has been evacuated; what is put in its place must look toward a new Euro-modern future.

From these carefully studied forms, Marker and Resnais will begin to map these objects onto a new history, one that maintains at its core a notion of “Western” cultural lineage. Showing 13th-14th century bronze heads from Ife, the narrator remarks on their similarity with the ancient art of Greece: “If their history is an enigma, their shapes are not foreign to us. After the Frisians, the monsters, the helmeted Atrides of Benin, all the vestments of Greece over a people of a sect, here are their Apollos from Ife which strike us with a familiar language.” The museum, formerly accused of being a mausoleum, is now declared to be a “paradise of forms,” a place where formal ressemblances materialize and “mysterious relations (*parentés*) are established” between disparate objects. We are shown African masks which resemble art from a wide range of historical and geographic contexts. “We recognize Greece in an old African head of 2000 years, Japan in a mask from Logoué, and still India, Sumerian idols, our Roman Christ, or our modern art.” Though this sequence is brief, this last comparison is particularly arresting. We do not linger on the mask that has been found to resemble modern Western art, as if modern art were

not at its core the product of exposure to African abstraction. What is elided in this formal resemblance is the history that links them, not so distant and lost as Marker and Resnais claim. In fact, Marker and Resnais are filming in the very location of the key encounter between Picasso and African art--the Musée de l'Homme, formerly the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro. This "discovery" of resemblance to modern art represents an incredible act of forgetting, a reminder of the dangers of purely formal associations. Picasso here is permitted to paint his own precursor (in Bloomian fashion), so that the modern avant-garde appears to give birth to its own ancestor, a mysterious *parenté* indeed.

Having fit African art into a self-serving history, Marker and Resnais map its future as well. For most of the film, we have enjoyed only the "society of statues." Privy only to objects cramped in tight, interior shots, seen against blank gallery walls, when we finally see a living person, a black man surfacing in a pond, it is like coming up for air. The notion of a living African artist has been so delayed in *Statues Also Die* that by the time he arrives on the scene, African aesthetic practices have already been carefully laid out. Still, Marker and Resnais have much to add to the question of African art's modern incarnation. In a sequence that finds Marker and Resnais at their most proscriptive, they stipulate that the modern African artist must eschew commercial art, a "degrade[d]" form of "handicraft" in which the "village is vulgarized, and the technique is impoverished." Marker and Resnais lament the lack of skill in African art "made for whites," they rue the abundance of African Christian art, the lack of Islamic art, and art is that is ugly. Ironically, their strongest objection is to African artists practicing the "art of the portrait," as they show a black artist sculpting in a naturalistic style [Figure 20]. "No longer capable of expressing the essential, the sculptor seeks after resemblance. We taught him not to carve farther than the tip of his nose." The audacity of French auteurs criticizing the production of art in one's

own image is remarkable. That African artists might have their own relationships to portraiture and naturalism, a different historical trajectory than the European avant-garde, does not occur to Marker and Resnais here.

Figure 20

What should black art aspire to then, according to Marker and Resnais? Black art, according to *Statues*, is provisional, transitional, and not yet fully formed. At this point, the simple periodization woven through the film--dead, "traditional" art vs. a "modern," living art, becomes more fully fleshed out. Modern African art, we are told, is an "art of transition for a period of transition. Art of the present time, between a lost greatness and another to conquer. Art of the provisional, whose ambition is not to last, but to witness." Leaving one age behind, forging a new one ahead, African art is now defined by this great split-- when it became assimilated into Western art.

What do Marker and Resnais mean by an "art of transition?" Over the course of the film, we see many images of transition and changes of state, particularly images of life, death, purification, and sacrifice. In one sequence, we are made to witness the evisceration of a live gorilla on screen, told that his strength is "free now, it wanders, it will torment the living" until it

is reinstated in new form. “It is to this [re]appearance that the blood of sacrifice is addressed. And it is this appearance that is fixed in these legendary metamorphoses in order to appease it until these winning faces [the masks] are done repairing the fabric of the world.” Marker and Resnais seem to suggest that this art of transition will serve a ritualistic function, to haunt the colonizer in death but ultimately to reincarnate, and in so doing, bring black and white together again. “Black art was the instrument of a will to grasp the world and also of the will which undertook to change its form. There would be nothing to prevent us from being, together, the inheritors of two pasts, if that equality could be recovered in the present.” Presumably, in this idea of a *future present*, a present to come, the African artist will finally enjoy full equality and the power of self-determination.

Statues Also Die is a complicated film, oscillating between its competing and often incongruous desires. In their fervent hope to find a future beyond colonialism’s violence, Marker and Resnais place too much faith in modern African art’s ability to heal the wounds of the modern world, and too little faith in its ability operate without supervision. The paradox at the heart of Marker and Resnais’ argument, expressed but never confronted, is that they cannot simultaneously celebrate the independent African artist and protect the aesthetic legacy of the avant-garde. In the end, it is not enough for them to imagine a continent freed from colonialism. Marker and Resnais insist on a future that also bears out the value of their aesthetic preferences.

* * *

Becoming Classic, Becoming Modern: *Notes for an African Orestes*

Though Marker and Resnais produced their film a full twenty years before Pasolini released *Notes for an African Orestes*, the two films converge on the moment of African independence in a kind of temporal parallax. *Statues* was rarely screened until after 1968 due to

censorship (long enough to render its push for African independence a dead letter), and though Pasolini's film was filmed in 1969, the film itself poses the question of when it should be set: at the time of filming or a decade earlier, at the moment of independence? Pasolini ultimately settles on 1960, and so, despite the difference in time between the two films' releases, both films try to capture African independence from either side of the event. The two resulting perspectives are quite distinct: where *Statues* mourned the death of a "helmeted Atrides of Benin," (referring to a brass cast), in *An African Orestes,* the house of Atreus is quite literal, and the mourning of its son, Agamemnon, is celebrated as a sign of Africa's liberation from the past.

In the same way that Marker and Resnais map African aesthetics onto a Western history of art, Pasolini hypothesizes that Aeschylus' *Oresteia* tells the story of African modernity. Yet the unusual format of Pasolini's film--that of scouting notes pieced together accompanied by voiceover-- produces a film that seeks equivalences in his subjects rather than equality. Though the film ostensibly represents an attempt or a "sketch"[203] of a film, I would like to suggest that this film puts its own subjects on trial rather than the film concept itself. In refusing to let his subjects divert the course of the narrative, Pasolini reveals his inability to recognize an African modernity that does not follow the classical model he has constructed for it.

Notes for an African Orestes follows a model that had already structured two of Pasolini's previous scouting films: *Sopralluoghi in Palestina per il vangelo secondo Matteo/Seeking Locations in Palestine (For the Gospel According to Matthew)* (1965) and *Appunti per un film sull'India/Notes for a Film on India* (1968). As in his other scouting films, Pasolini can be seen collecting locations, characters, and interviews from his travels. Apart from

[203] The essay-film-as-sketch was a concept associated with the films of Roberto Rossellini. See Jacques Rivette's essay, "Letter on Rossellini" (1955).

using a handful of non-professional actors, the subjects of *An African Orestes* are not directed.[204] As in *Statues*, the construction of the narrative happens primarily in the editing process. Though stylistically similar to Marker and Resnais, Pasolini did not identify himself with avant-garde cinema. Pasolini saw himself as a classicist, and yet like Marker and Resnais, was fully committed to the auteur model. Maurizio Viano describes Pasolini as "adamant" in "his belief in authorship as the expression of individuals who are in control of the meaning they create" and "jealously claimed total authorship for his work."[205] Yet Pasolini's concept of auteurism was unique. Unlike the impersonal, voice-of-god narrator of *Statues*, Pasolini himself guides us through the film, his voice fractured by plans, doubts, and questions. Pasolini makes room in his film for a number of interlocutors— Aeschylus's text primarily, but also the African students of the University of Rome, and to a lesser extent, his other documentary subjects. As Pasolini struggles to link an African history of violence and mourning to the *Oresteia*, the question of his control over the film's authorship becomes central.

The first image of *Notes for an African Orestes*, shown during the opening credits, is a copy of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* displayed next to a map of Africa. Though placed side by side here, as if equally weighted, the book clearly takes precedence in the film, providing its narrative arc. Though the mapping which Pasolini performs (identifying and linking locations) is generally subservient to Aeschylus' narrative, it does generate an unusual way of reading the map of Africa: we find ancient Greece in Tanzania, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Biafra (now Southeastern Nigeria). Kampala stands for Athens, though it also appears to extend to the University of Rome, which itself includes students from Ethiopia, Nigeria, and the Congo. By

[204] The technique of using both professional actors and nonprofessional actors in both staged and documentary footage was also instrumental in Pasolini's *Medea* (1969), another classical adaptation he was working on at the same time as *Notes for an African Orestes*.
[205] Maurizio Sanzo Viano, "Authorial Intertext," *A Certain Realism: Making use of Pasolini's Film Theory and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 4.

reading the map like Aeschylus' play, the continent is mapped by collage, creating new links that could, in theory, tell us more about the post-independent content than the lines drawn by dry administrative survey or the accidents of colonial history, and perhaps even shed new light on Aeschylus' text.

Yet upon inspection, the logic of Pasolini's mapping appears less the product of insightful comparisons than the result of his own idiosyncratic wanderings. The superficial nature of Pasolini's analysis is particularly evident in his fixation on glass window displays, not unlike the glass displays of African art that drew Marker and Resnais' attention. Pasolini uses windows to ground his commentary on East African consumption patterns. By pointing out signs of American and Chinese ways of life on display, Pasolini maps Africa's relation to the rest of the world, symbolized by these visions of capitalist and socialist alternatives for Africa. By peering into these windows, we peer "out" of Africa, "into" the rest of the world, and yet in another sense, these yet-unpurchased refrigerators and images of Mao seem to map Africa's future for Pasolini. Pasolini suggests that Africans will choose a future by window shopping, in the same way Pasolini himself goes window shopping for images and information, and that an African future will necessarily be shaped by forces from outside the continent.

As Pasolini continues his expedition for images, characters, and settings, he is most interested in finding his chorus. This is an area of the film in which Pasolini is most flexible with Aeschylus' text. What would have been the elders of Argos and libation bearers in the *Oresteia* is a more capacious category in Pasolini's film: people working, people talking to each other, people selling things in the market, children, youth, students, travelers. In order to fit his chorus characters into Aeschylus' text, Pasolini uses free indirect discourse. Pasolini notably adapted for cinema the novelistic concept of free indirect discourse by severing the character's perspective

from the point-of-view shot, so that the director can express his/her perspective with any kind of shot. This frees Pasolini from having to film his subjects up close. From a distance, he imagines they are talking politics, he voices their prayers to God, and he speaks the lines of the *Oresteia* on their behalf. Yet he has difficulty carrying out this technique with African women. Pasolini finds African women difficult to incorporate into the *Oresteia*: "They are unaware of the sentiments of pride, of hate, which animated Electra. They laugh: they don't know how to do anything else."[206] His most suitable subjects are discovered when Pasolini visits a "completely modern school." He shows us students sitting in "respectful" silence, "before a knowledge, presented to them as a gift, they are obedient, passive, humble." These would seem to be precisely the traits that make them most convenient for Pasolini's chorus: quiet, solicitous, uninterested by the camera.

Tellingly, Pasolini sets up a contrast between these students of the chorus and the group of African university students from whom he will seek feedback, panning almost seamlessly from the primary classroom in Tanzania to a university classroom in Rome [Figure 21]. These particular university students will appear twice during the film, before the play begins and as it is about to end, and though they are also treated as a collective and are permitted to comment on the film, they provide a counterpoint to Pasolini's silent chorus: these students speak, and they do not speak with one voice. Pasolini pitches his movie to these students (he implies that they have just seen the same scouting footage that we have), but rather than ask them to comment generally on the film, Pasolini asks the students a very precise question: during what time period should the film be set, around 1960 or the present-day? The students listen politely, and, as Michael Syrimis observes, there is a "sense of awkwardness in the scene, perhaps because the

[206] Citations from the film are my own translations from the French version of *Notes For An African Orestes*.

students are asked to critique the work of a celebrity in his presence and while being filmed."[207] Even so, most students question the basic premise of the film, rather than respond to Pasolini's narrow question, putting particular pressure on the question of the African nation within his schema, a concept that seems to be absent from Pasolini's adaptation.

Figure 21

If the power imbalance in the room is at first unspoken, it becomes explicit when Pasolini, perhaps caught off guard, refuses to give any weight to the students' comments. Pasolini questions the viability of the African nation as a component of Africa's future, explaining that national boundaries are a colonial invention, that "[o]ne should not be afraid of reality. One has to confront it." The mood of the room generally fits the university setting they are in— an intellectual discussion in which Pasolini shepherds the group between topics—but at other times it resembles something stranger, like a warped struggle session in which a single European communist roots out the bourgeois illusions of all the African students of Rome. The next time these students appear, at the end of the film, Pasolini edits them in so that they appear to fill the chairs of Orestes' jury (staged in the empty courtroom in Dar-es-Salaam). Yet we have

[207] Michael Syrimis, "Self-Parody in Pasolini's *La ricotta* and *Appunti per un'Orestiade africana,*" *Forum Italicum* 47 no.3, (2013): 564.

to question who is on trial: is it Orestes, Pasolini's film, or is it these students who are judged by Pasolini as to whether they have properly understood the film and their own futures?

Having scouted the chorus and consulted the university students about the temporal setting, Pasolini tells the story of the *Oresteia*, which turns out to be quite short relative to its preamble. We see the victory signal relayed to Argos, the Battle of Troy, Cassandra's prophecy, Agamemnon's murder by Clytemnestra, Orestes and Electra at their father's tomb, Orestes fleeing the Furies for the Temple of Apollo, and finally his trial and absolution through the guidance of Athena. Pasolini frequently uses actors to stage or reinterpret Aeschylus' scenes, but whenever he can find contemporary or historical equivalencies with events from the *Oresteia,* Pasolini uses documentary footage. Yet in order for these documentary equivalencies to tell Aeschylus' story, Pasolini must strip them of specificity. For example, the Biafran War, which was ongoing at the time Pasolini was filming, serves as the Trojan War. Despite the recency of the violence he calls up, Pasolini instructs us to think of it as "an abstract war," an exercise made easier by the fact that the war was taking place a few thousand miles away from where Pasolini was filming. In trying to prove his thesis that African modernity is like the *Oresteia*, Pasolini, much like Marker and Resnais, has to convince us that African modernity is an event without history, without memory, and without specificity.

Much like in *Statues*, Pasolini, having evacuated history from his images of African modernity, celebrates their formal properties. He reserves a final sequence for the representation of the Furies' transformation into the Eumenides. Pasolini shows us the Wagogo people performing what used to be "a rite with precise religious significations, perhaps cosmogonic," that is now nothing but a celebration which they perform "gaily, to enjoy themselves, stripping [the rites] of their ancient sacred significations, for pure pleasure." The memory of a violent past

does not interfere with the celebration of the present, and thus the Eumenides have not just inaugurated a "formal democracy" as Pasolini stresses, but also a formal *aesthetic*, one in which trauma and loss become vestigial, mere adornment. As for Marker and Resnais, Africa is haunted by terrifying ghosts of the past, but for Pasolini, they become sublimated into the patron saints of art. Thus the allegory of decolonization, peace, and democracy in *An African Orestes* also becomes an allegory about the pacification of an aesthetic. Elsewhere Pasolini describes his vision of an African poetry to come in terms of Aeschylus: "[R]ather than presiding over horrible, obsessive, degrading dreams, [the Eumenides] preside instead over works of poetry, of fantasy, of feeling."[208] Rohdie argues that, for Pasolini, the *Oresteia* and the history of Africa were both about the "taming of what was real, primitive, terrible into the rationality and controllability of signs and language. It brought the primitive under the control of civility, reason, order. In so doing, the Furies remained, but with their irrational force now a force for poetry, or more exactly a poetic force."[209] Thus what started as a lesson of history has within it a lesson of aesthetic criticism, one that revives a narrative of colonial conquest and civilization.

By the end of *An African Orestes*, we can see what Pasolini has left out in his retelling of Aeschylus' tragedy. Ironically, the Furies—the ominous baobabs, shaking with just such obsessive and degrading dreams—are the most well-drawn female characters in the film. In Pasolini's hands, the family drama of the *Oresteia* is strangely male-dominated. Electra's role is downplayed, while the role of Clytemnestra remains a real casting problem for Pasolini. Only a heavily-veiled woman vaguely fits his idea of the role. He considers another ("too young" he concludes) that makes an exaggerated, threatening gesture [Figure 22]. She is theatrical, commanding, and she is making her friends laugh. The hushed spell of the *Oresteia* is broken for

[208] Ibid. Originally printed in "Nota per l'ambientazione dell'Orestiade in Africa," *La città futura* June 7, 1978.
[209] Sam Rohdie, "And Africa?" *The Passion of Pier Paolo Pasolini* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press; London: BFI Publishing, 1995), 87.

a moment, as the now-lost satyr play of the *Oresteia* would have done, and so here is a moment where Pasolini's subjects and Aeschylus are perhaps more aligned with each other than with their auteur.

Figure 22

Might we see Aeschylus as a silenced interlocutor, since Pasolini has unceremoniously cut the scene of Clytemnestra's murder? Pasolini does not show us the reason for the Furies' vengeance or the reason for Orestes' trial. Pasolini has suppressed the crime from the origin story of the trial, the crime Orestes elects to commit so as not to transgress the higher law of leaving Agamemnon's death unavenged. Is it coincidence that this scene is elided when it is used to narrate the decolonization of Africa? The central message which Pasolini borrows from the *Oresteia* is that when violence repays violence, the cycle never ends, but he leaves aside the matricide which restores the house of Atreus. Pasolini instead urges these young Oresteis (in Athena's words), "not [to] renounce the suffering you must suffer," because the future requires "a great patience." Like the Furies, they must accept a symbolic place of honor in exchange for the right to take revenge. If women were not sufficiently mournful for Pasolini's elegy, he seems to have punished them by giving them no role at all in the staging of modern Africa.

Pasolini's *African Orestes* would have us believe that in order for Africa to become modern, it must first become classical, that the same narrative through which he understands the birth of Western modernity must also be the source of Africa's. And yet he struggles to make even Aeschylus' text illustrate the values of modernity as he sees them: progression toward democracy, peace, and reconciliation-- "civilization" on his terms. Pasolini might have made a film that considered the ways in which African modernity challenges the centrality of Western culture, a film that embraced the obstinacy of his subjects rather than suppressed it, that allowed female subjects to assert their modernity and, perhaps, their perspectives on restorative justice. We can only imagine the *Oresteia* his subjects might have told, and how their visions of African modernity might have helped us see Aeschylus' play anew.

* * *

Our Trip to Africa: The European in Africa

Peter Kubelka's *Our Trip to Africa* represents a significant stylistic departure from the films previously discussed in this chapter. While *Statues Also Die* and *An African Orestes* feature voiceover narrators who guide us through the film, telling us what we are seeing and how we should feel about it, Kubelka leaves us to our own devices. There is no narrator, no sign of the filmmaker, and even the dialogue--choppy, muffled, de-contextualized German and Arabic--goes untranslated. As we witness images of humiliation, brutality, and the suffering and dying of animals without the ethical positioning of an external authorial voice, it is nearly impossible to separate the film's critique from its self-critique, the act of observation from that of participation. If Marker, Resnais, and Pasolini express a desire for an African subject who could intervene in aesthetic and political debates, one with the power to shape the future, Kubelka expresses no such explicit desire. In this lack, he seems to break from the dialogic ideal of the essay film. Yet

with Kubelka, we see an increasing concern for the *medium's* "speech," for the ability of film to express itself uniquely as film, so much so that the speech of the subjects who appear in the film seems to be competing with it. By articulating a particular "film language," Kubelka levels the relationship between colonizer and colonized in a new way. The figure of "the European" occupies the screen as never before, and as Kubelka shows, needs little help destroying the myth of his civilizational might. Yet in foregrounding his own notion of film and its unique properties, Kubelka's film begs the question: can this language alone perform an act of (anti-colonial) critique?

Peter Kubelka made *Our Trip to Africa* as a young filmmaker, when he was hired by a group of Austrian sportsmen and women to film their hunting expedition. As he tells Scott MacDonald, the group traveled by bus through Yugoslavia and Egypt, by boat down the Nile, and into Sudan by way of the Sudanese railway.[210] Filmed in 1961 and finished by 1966, during which time Kubelka edited his footage down to less than thirteen minutes of tightly-composed images and sound. The final product was such an unflattering portrait of Kubelka's employers that they were said to have assaulted him after the premiere.[211] Kubelka's hunt for images turned out to be very different from the trophy shots his employers expected, but Kubelka had his own ambitions: "I knew from the moment I became involved with film that I didn't want to work with a second-rate medium. I wanted film to be as strong as other media, and even stronger than other media for what it alone can do."

Kubelka's works can be seen as an assertion of cinema as "absolutely autonomous art form,"[212] though he does compare the difficulty of translating his work into words with the

[210] Scott MacDonald, "Peter Kubelka: On *Unsere Afrikareise*," *A Critical Cinema, Volume 4: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 158-162.
[211] Ibid., 177.
[212] Ibid., 163; 168.

abstraction of music. This musical quality, of rhythms and successions of images and sounds is similar to the essay films we have seen here, but in order to speak of "content" in Kubelka's film, one would have to rely wholly on the grammar of these elements. Kubelka provides no narration: if there is an idea or argument being advanced, it is articulated via the juxtaposition of sound-images. Some dialogue occurs in the background, but Kubelka is unconcerned about our ability to understand it, telling us, "All the information is there, even if you don't speak German or Austrian dialect or Sudanese." For Kubelka, the important language is the cinematic one; one's task in watching a film is to learn to interpret this language.[213]

Figure 23

What does Kubelka's film language tell us? Kubelka's film shows us Europeans living out their colonial fantasies, hunting big game with African servants in tow. But Kubelka shows the comedy in their desperate and brutish attempt to assert their power. In one series of images, Kubelka pairs the image of a wounded zebra writhing in agony with that of a woman daintily bandaging her hand. A dying animal struggles in the water, to the sound of a tango, while a white man eats out of a bowl in his hand, remarking at how delicious it is. A tall, thin black man dressed as a guide dwarfs two male Europeans, who look up at him like children [Figure 23]. Watching, eating, lounging in the Africa they have made, these Austrians use Africans to support

[213] Ibid., 164. Kubelka says that his lectures on cinema "are an attempt to teach the viewer my cinematic language."

their hunting rifles as well as their colonial desires, but they don't realize they are in Kubelka's sights as well. Kubelka playfully makes the hunters his quarry. When one loses his hat in a strong gust of wind, Kubelka synchronizes its flight with the sound of a shot. In another sequence, he observes a hunter lining up a shot of an antelope, at the same moment Kubelka aligns both prey and predator in his own clear sightline. Kubelka does not shoot to kill, but he deprives his subjects of the pleasure of their sport and the illusion of power they draw from it.

Yet in expressing his critique primarily through camerawork, through the composition and juxtaposition of images, Kubelka risks participating in the activities that play out on screen and embroiling his viewers in the act as well. Exploring the intersection between pleasure and violence, Kubelka draws out the formal beauty of the horrific images he captures. He frames the abstract pattern of a dying zebra's stripes, its perfect symmetry smeared with bright red blood. He lingers on the formal resonances between the animal flesh killed in the hunt and the nude bodies of the African women that come into contact with the band of hunters. In a particularly skin-crawling sequence, the image of a woman's nipple is match cut to an elephant's eye as the wrinkled skin is cut away. Playing with the conventions of pornography and snuff films, Kubelka shocks the viewer by pairing the erotic with the revolting, beauty with suffering. Kubelka's images visually reproduce the acts of cruelty, sexualization, and aestheticization carried out by his patrons, and without a voice of authority to ground us in an external, moral or ethical positioning, we participate in them. Without a clear boundary between participation and critique, *Our Trip to Africa* leaves no safe sideline from which to criticize its subjects.

By declining to take a categorical ethical position, *Our Trip to Africa* leaves open-ended its relationship to existing discourses. As Catherine Russell notes, "The film seemed to be a critique of the safari that Kubelka was commissioned to shoot, but it lacked the political rhetoric

of anti-colonialism."[214] Though Kubelka refuses to link his film to anti-colonialism explicitly, he does not specifically deny it: "I do not speak about the politics because I want the film to speak about this."[215] Most discussions of Kubelka's film take the filmmaker's lead, focusing on what the film "says" about cinema. Scott MacDonald praises Kubelka's ability to raise the profile of the film as a medium: "Kubelka's commitment to using the essential formal options of cinema to fashion a cinematic art that can compete with the artistic accomplishments of music, painting, and literature."[216] As MacDonald suggests, Kubelka's essay film represents a departure from early essay film; no longer a film trying to be an essay, the film itself creates its own critical language. Yet in making the medium itself the subject whose speech must be heard, Kubelka suggests that the film can only be compromised by its translation into other forms of speech, whether that is the dialogue of his human subjects or ongoing discourse about postcolonial African modernity.

Keeping the European in his sights far more than the African allows Kubelka to level the playing field between colonized and colonizer in a new way, but the desire for an African interlocutor seems to have receded. Kubelka doesn't raise the question of the African filmmaker, and seems to doubt the viability of an African cinema or even an African audience. What does it mean if Africans are precluded from communicating via film, the only medium that seems to count in Kubelka's estimation? When commenting on the inclusivity of the title, "Our Trip to Africa," Kubelka considers the possibility as an African audience as an afterthought: "[The title] includes everybody—except the Africans, if they were to see the film."[217]

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[214] Russell, "*Unsere Afrikareise*: Desiring Machines," *Experimental Ethnography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 126.
[215] MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema,* 164.
[216] Ibid., 159.
[217] Ibid., 165.

Yet the space for an African interlocutor to come is still perceptible; Kubelka can only do so much to keep an intertextual dialogue out of his film, and in it, we see the space where an African response would be. In the final few shots of the film, Kubelka gives us his grim impression of how an African might view the film. Kubelka shows us a nude black man walking, a sharp spear coming into frame as the shot ends. An image of provincial Europe flashes across the screen: a distant figure in a headscarf walks across a snowy landscape. It is a shot which recalls the extreme long shots with which Kubelka has been used to show the Europeans' quarry, elephants and gazelles just before they are sprayed with bullets. In a final shot of spear-carrier, we can just make out a clenched fist.

Is *Our Trip to Africa* a wordless yet persuasive anti-colonial critique? A commentary on the persistence of colonial memory? Perhaps it is an indictment of cinema itself, its function as a powerful technology of the gaze and its entanglement with fantasies of violence and power. Or is it an attempt to redeem cinema, to show that it can de-fantasize the colonial fantasy, rewrite the cultural myths of European supremacy, and wither the roots of violent desire that colonialism has put down in each of us? In the end, the critique or lack thereof in *Our Trip To Africa* seems to come down to whether or not it is truly *our* trip to Africa, and who *we* are. If Africans are left out of the film's dialogic address, of what use to them is the critique?

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To Stare With Equality: *Sans Soleil*

Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* is a film that examines its own desire to film the postcolonial encounter. In its attempt to probe this desire, it seeks out the desiring subject: subjects looking at each other, at precious objects, and at the camera. "Frankly, have you ever heard of anything

stupider than to say to people, as they teach in film schools, not to look at the camera?"[218] the narrator asks. The subject who desires to return the camera's gaze mirrors the filmmaker's curiosity for him. What is unusual about Marker's approach to this subject is that he not only observes these desiring subjects but explicitly invents them, an innovation that allows him and us to look critically at the desires that drive his own film. In following these desires to their source, *Sans Soleil* begins to answer some of the questions that *Our Trip To Africa* seemed to pose, questions about the intersection of history and desire, and cinema's role in bringing them together. Exploring the relationship between the returned gaze and colonial guilt, *Sans Soleil* crisscrosses the globe, trying to find hope in a world where the best intentions of anticolonialism have failed, where the wounds of colonialism are as deep as ever, and the "winning faces" of *Statues* are not yet "done repairing the fabric of the world."

Filmed over more than a decade and in six different countries, *Sans Soleil* is a story told through the letters of a filmmaker named Sandor Krasna, as read by an unknown and unseen woman, presumably the letters' addressee. In the same way that Kubelka plays with distance from and identification with the gaze, Marker distances himself from his narrator. Our narrator is neither the omniscient authorial voice it was in *Statues*, nor is it the persona of the filmmaker himself, as it was in Pasolini's *African Orestes*. In the essay film, we typically presume a close relationship between author and narrator, but here we are left in doubt. Krasna can describe the images we are seeing, telling us he wants to put them in a film: "I'm collecting the sets, inventing the twists, putting in my favorite creatures. I've even given it a title, indeed the title of those Mussorgsky songs: 'Sunless.'" These "favorite creatures" are the cat and the owl, the same Marker includes in his films, suggesting that Marker and Krasna share some distinguishing traits.

[218] The English quotations are from the English version of the film; the French from the French version. "Franchement, a-t-on jamais rien inventé de plus bête que de dire aux gens, comme on l'enseigne dans les écoles de cinéma, de ne pas regarder la caméra?"

Catherine Lupton argues that Sandor Krasna could in fact be anyone, that he is a mysterious, nomadic figure, whose cultural references change depending on the language in which his letters are dubbed. Yet in both the English and French versions of the film, it is made quite clear he is a European, and in the scene in which he is watching television, he reveals that he is a Francophone. Krasna is clearly a figure for Marker, and though they are not identical, Krasna is not a total fiction, nor does Marker completely sever his persona from his own national and cultural positioning.

Though his close alignment with Marker lends Krasna some narrative authority, the gap between them gives a viewer space to critique Krasna. We know so little about either "voice"-- either the letter writer or receiver-- that they never cohere into characters. They remain in suspension, disembodied, obscure, while the people and things on which Krasna is commenting are more immediate. In instances where Krasna views his subjects ungenerously, we may be tempted to turn against our unseen narrator, such as in Tokyo when Krasna comments, "I've never seen so many people reading in the streets. Perhaps they read only in the street, or perhaps they just pretend to read—these yellow men." Marker is adept at the subtle undermining of his subjects, a strategy he used to great effect in *Joli Mai*. In one example from *Joli Mai*, Marker is talking to an inventor, who boasts about his success while confessing his frustration that his name is not yet well-known, all while Marker tracks the progress of a spider across his lapel. In *Sans Soleil*, Marker has imparted this device to his own narrator by dividing our focus and identification. In this separation, the images that played a supporting role now have an opportunity to betray the unseen narrator who comments on them, and permits us to identify with the subjects of the film over the narrator.

Loosely structured by Krasna's thoughts, *Sans Soleil* follows Krasna along his journeys as he encounters striking images and people. Krasna borrows the phrase "things that quicken the heart" from Sei Shonagon, an author and lady of the court in 11th century Japan, and it serves as a kind of organizing principle for a film full of images which seem connected only by the idiosyncratic relationships Krasna draws between them. Krasna explains that, having been around the world, he is drawn only to banality, and banality seems to lend itself to his wilder daydreams. He imagines people sleeping on the ferry between Hokkaido and Tokyo to be in the middle of a war, commuters on a train are edited into the horror and pornographic films Krasna watched the night before, young men on computers in a mall are imagined to be Athenians training at the Palestra. The more mundane the activity, the more liberties Krasna takes to invest it with his own narrative energy, to make it his own exciting, pleasurable experience.

Krasna's most passionate activity is finding desire in his subjects, to find other desiring subjects like himself. Krasna speaks about the pleasure in the "poignancy of things," a phrase he borrows from Levi-Strauss, which he describes as a "communion with things, of entering into them, of being them for a moment." Despite Levi-Strauss' elevated description, Krasna's objectives differ from the ostensibly nobler aims of the other auteurs, usually revolving around his own pleasure-seeking impulses. Often Krasna must use his imagination, inventing visual role-playing games which allow him to engage his subjects in the titillating, the taboo, and the self-serving without their knowledge. Sometimes Krasna plays these games with himself, like when delights at a French program playing on Japanese television, allowing him to pretend for a moment that he speaks Japanese.[219] But sometimes Krasna happens upon people visibly taking

[219] "Not understanding obviously adds to the pleasure, for one slightly hallucinatory moment I had the impression that I spoke Japanese but it was a cultural program about Gerard de Nerval." "Ne pas comprendre ajoute évidemment à la jouissance. Un instant, j'ai eu l'impression un peu hallucinatoire d'entendre le japonais, comme M. Fenouillard, mais c'était une émission culturelle de la NHK sur Nerval."

pleasure in some activity. Krasna spies on the Japanese who flock to an exhibit about the Vatican, catching them off guard while they peer into vitrines, just like the visitors in *Statues Also Die,* gleefully observing their "fascination…with the sacred, even when it's someone else's."

But the things that quicken Krasna's heart are also morbid. Troubled by the passage of time, the loss of memory, and death, Krasna is drawn to poignant images, particularly which capture the moments before death, like when Krasna shows us a giraffe just before he is killed execution-style. He seems fascinated by film's ability to return us to moments of life and possibility, even after the most traumatic events. Krasna reflects on the historical implications of film's relationship to loss: we see kamikazes leaving, never to return, and Amilcar Cabral's parting gesture to the Bissau-Guinean shore, as if he knows his assassin waits for him in Guinea. How to wind back the footage, how to intervene in the cycle of death before it is too late? How to return us to a time of hope and historical possibility?

Krasna's wanderings seem to be, in part, motivated by a search for a new approach to time and loss. He finds solace in the rituals he observes: a carnival in Bissau, where colorful animal masks appear to "resurrect" the dead bones littering the Sahel [Figure 24], and Japanese ceremonies mourn broken dolls, dead zoo animals, and debris. The female voice tells us that Krasna "contrasted African time to European time, and also to Asian time. He said that in the 19th century mankind had come to terms with space, and that the great question of the 20th was the coexistence of different concepts of time."[220] A Japanese person reportedly tells Krasna, "the partition separating life and death does not appear so thick to us as it does to the Westerner." At a temple consecrated to cats, a couple is mourning their lost cat in advance since they will not be

[220] "II m'écrivait d'Afrique. II opposait le temps africain au temps européen, mais aussi au temps asiatique. II disait qu'au XIX° siècle l'humanité avait réglé ses comptes avec l'espace, et que l'enjeu du XX° était la cohabitation des temps."

able to know when she dies. Krasna observes that they have come to "repair the web of time where it had been broken,"[221] a phrase which itself is a kind of memory, having appeared first thirty years ago in *Statues Also Die*.[222] At that time, it was uttered as an article of faith, an assertion that the wounds of colonialism could and would soon be healed; now it serves as a more modest comfort, a suggestion that somewhere on earth, life and death are still in balance. If in the 1950s radical change felt imminent, now Krasna combs the earth for signs that reconciliation with death and loss is still possible, keeping alive the possibility that the most shameful traces of historical crime may one day disappear.

Figure 24

If the 20th century is about coming to terms with time, as Krasna believes, Krasna seems only capable of doing so *by way* of space. But if it is "Africa" which serves as this space in the films discussed so far, in *Sans Soleil,* this mode of thinking has become geographically and historically specific. Guinea Bissau plays an important role in Krasna's conversation with the dreams of thirty years ago, and in the events that foreclosed radical possibilities for change. Krasna makes a pilgrimage to the site of the Pidjuguiti massacre of 1959, where strikers protested Portuguese rule and fifty were killed by the Portuguese. For Krasna, the history

[221] "…le rite qui allait réparer, à l'endroit de l'accroc, le tissu du temps."
[222] The role of the masks in *Statues Also Die* is to "repair the fabric of the world." "…ces visages victorieux qui réparent le tissus du monde."

Guinea-Bissau represents vast effort for an independent, socialist future that could have had reverberations across the world:

> They did what they could, they freed themselves, they chased out the Portuguese. They traumatized the Portuguese army to such an extent that it gave rise to a movement that overthrew the dictatorship, and led one for a moment to believe in a new revolution in Europe. Who remembers all that? History throws its empty bottles out the window.

Krasna gives special attention to the loss of Amilcar Cabral, and in doing so, offers a soundtrack as a way of memorializing him. Krasna's addressee says, as Cape Verdean music plays, "He wrote me that the pictures of Guinea-Bissau ought to be accompanied by music from the Cape Verde islands. That would be our contribution to the unity dreamed of by Amilcar Cabral." Krasna even reanimates Cabral's poignant, fatal gesture by editing in his brother and then-president Luis Cabral waving hello rather than goodbye, simply by running the footage backward.

If the "West" lacks the sort of ritual that would allow it to come to terms with tragedy, Marker's techniques suggest that film might serve in its stead. Krasna is fascinated by the effect of a cinematic filter, which he credits as coming from Japan. For images that are not properly remembered or mourned, that seem to repeat themselves in a cycle of violence and amnesia, Krasna's friend Hayao Yamaneko runs them through a synthesizer that treats them with a psychedelic filter, an effect Yamaneko calls the Zone, named after the place of the same name in Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979). "If the images of the present don't change, then change the image of the past," Yamaneko counsels Krasna. The processed images are "less deceptive… At least they proclaim themselves to be what they are: images." If Pasolini urged us to idealize, to classicise images of violence and tragedy, the Zone filters images to render them particular, to help us remember them, and perhaps, to halt the horrifying sensation of being in a persistent state of violence and loss.

The appearance of the Tarkovsky's Zone brings us into the realm of science-fiction, and Krasna introduces a different kind of traveler- a time traveler from the future. Krasna tells us that his science-fiction film, *Sans Soleil*, will feature a traveler who visits our century from the fortieth, a time when pain, unhappiness, and forgetting have been rendered obsolete, as film was supposed to have made forgetting obsolete, he tells us. Rather than pity the humans of our time, this traveler "turned to it first with curiosity and then with compassion…he feels these infirmities of time like an injustice, and he reacts to that injustice …with indignation. He is a Third Worlder of Time." [223] Yet the tragedy of the time traveler is that his compassion and curiosity cannot bring him any closer to the objects of his pity. Krasna says of his time traveler: "He has chosen to give up his privileges, but he can do nothing about the privilege that has allowed him to choose." Like Marker, this traveler cannot turn away from the injustices he sees, and yet cannot fully understand them either. Reacting to the suffering he witnesses with curiosity, compassion, and finally indignation, he is still separate from the injustice he witnesses by the privilege of choice.

If this series of avatars--from Marker to Krasna to the time traveler--points us back to the filmmaker himself, might we also see this privilege of choice as the privilege of the auteur in Africa? His is the privilege to choose everything: the objects within the frame, the shot distance, shot length, their aural accompaniment. He chooses which bodies, voices, objects, sounds, and effects will be transferred into the final film, how and in what places and times they will appear--in short, all the artistic and legal choices which comprise *les droits de l'auteur.* The filmmaker can of course *choose* to transfer these rights to his subjects- they are his to give up or give away--

[223] "…s'est pris pour elle d'abord de curiosité, ensuite de compassion…Ces infirmités du Temps, il les ressent comme une injustice, et à cette injustice … par l'indignation. C'est un tiers-mondiste du Temps."

but he cannot renounce the power to renounce his power, nor can he banish the guilt that comes with that knowledge.

Ultimately it is the illusion of giving up this power, of simply meeting the subject on equal terms, that is Krasna's most seductive fantasy. Twice in the film he claims to have found the "kind of place that allows people to stare at each other with equality, the *threshold* below which every man is as good as any other—and knows it (emphasis mine)."[224] These words are first spoken in a dive bar in Namidashi (Tokyo). Later in a marketplace, we will see this threshold again. Krasna asks:

> …how to film the ladies of Bissau? Apparently, the magical function of the eye was working against me there. It was in the marketplaces of Bissau and Cape Verde that I could stare at them again with equality: I see her, she saw me, she knows that I see her, she drops me her glance, but just at an angle where it is still possible to act as though it was not addressed to me, and at the end the real glance, straightforward, that lasted a twenty-fourth of a second, the length of a film frame.[225]

For only an instant, this woman looks up at us and we are permitted this instant of exchange, the kind of assurance for which Krasna is searching, that, in being subject to another's gaze, some form of communion is still possible. But Marker can not leave this inkling of hope as it is: at the end of *Sans Soleil,* this image returns, now in freeze-frame, that form of technology as old as Eadweard Muybridge and the earliest motion photography. This image now reminds us of the glory of cinema, the only medium that can preserve not just an instant, but a split-second picked out of a lineup, the only instrument that can make eternal a glance which was intended to remain under a *threshold* of perception.

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[224] "…ce genre d'endroit permet l'égalité du regard. Le seuil au-dessous duquel tout homme en vaut un autre, et le sait. "

[225] "Comment filmer les dames de Bissau? Apparemment la fonction magique de l'œil jouait là contre moi. C'est sur les marchés de Bissau et du Cap-Vert que j'ai retrouvé l'égalité du regard, et cette suite de figures si proches du rituel de la séduction: je la vois - elle m'a vu - elle sait que je la vois - elle m'offre son regard, mais juste à l'angle où il est encore possible de faire comme s'il ne s'adressait pas à moi - et pour finir le vrai regard, tout droit, qui a duré 1/25 de seconde, le temps d'une image."

Should we interpret this as an earnest gesture to prefigure the returned gaze, a future in which filmmaking is shared equally by colonizer and colonized? Or is there something perverse and self-serving in Krasna's desire to hold this woman's gaze against her will? It is worth bearing in mind that Tarkovsky's "Zone" revealed one's deepest unconscious desires and granted them despite oneself. One visits the Zone wanting to desire something noble, but is always given what one cannot resist wanting. In *Stalker,* we hear the story of Porcupine, who enters the Zone intending to save his brother's life, but finding himself granted wealth, he hangs himself. Might we see Marker's vision of the essay film as one dedicated to struggling with these desires? If the central question of *Stalker* is whether it is worth preserving the Zone as a place of hope, even if there is no one pure of heart who can desire what the human race needs, *Sans Soleil* echoes *Stalker* in its insistence that for better and for worse, film allows us a space to wrestle with the complicated desires that produce our utopian visions.

As the film ends, Marker's (and Krasna's) authorship fragments yet again, as Marker credits both real and imaginary filmmakers. Among the real is Sana Na N'hada, the Bissau-Guinean filmmaker and former soldier in Cabral's army[226] whose footage of Cabral Marker uses in the film. The fictional credits include Hayao Yamaneko, whose Zone (and not just Tarkovsky's) is at the heart of *Sans Soleil.* Yamaneko seems to represent the dialogue Marker perhaps desired his film to have. Critical to the logic of the essay film, Yamaneko is an interlocutor no less central for having never existed, or perhaps not existing yet. Blurring the line between actual and fictional attributions, Marker prompts us to reconsider the role of dialogue in the essay while marking the gap between the real and the ideal.

[226] Sana Na N'hada is well-known for co-directing *Mortu Nega/Death Denied* with Flora Gomes in 1988. N'hada's most recent film was *Kadjike/Sacred Bush* (2014).

A profoundly self-referential film, *Sans Soleil* demonstrates a willingness to name the feelings of desire, guilt, and failure that motivate the film essay's hunger for postcolonial connection. In our weakened identification with Marker, spread across his many avatars, *Sans Soleil* encourages us to identify with the thinking subject and the examined object at once, to examine in ourselves the confluence of individual and historical motivations. By wandering through our deepest desires as if an internalized landscape, a space as colonized by a modern history of global domination as any place that Krasna visits, Marker suggests we might someday break free not only of the cycles of violence and amnesia that characterize the contemporary world, but the space of idealistic projection that we force onto the colonial subject.

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Sound vs. Sense: Minh-ha's *Reassemblage*

A prolific feminist film theorist and filmmaker, Trinh T. Minh-ha challenges many of the unspoken norms of the essay film in Africa. Originally from Vietnam, Minh-ha's presence and participation within the essay film tradition disrupts a long line of white men who have shaped the essay film in Africa. Denied their legitimacy and authority, Minh-ha is acutely aware of the camera's role as a tool of domination, and she finds ways to use the medium while working at cross purposes with it. In the collage style of Minh-ha's *Reassemblage* (1983), filmed in Senegal, Minh-ha rejects the god complex of the auteur-editor, emphasizing instead the process of reassembling the image of an already autonomous world. I argue that Minh-ha forgoes the notion of "dialogue" and the interlocutor, moving away from the theme of colonial guilt and finding new ways to express hope for radical change. At the same time, in the retreat from dialogue, Minh-ha finds new difficulties, particularly in her attempt to articulate a transnational feminism.

While teaching in Senegal, Minh-ha began shooting *Reassemblage* (1983), the first of two films she made in West Africa.[227] Minh-ha writes that her audiences found it "bothersome to see a member of the Third World talking about (the representation of) another Third World Culture—instead of minding our business."[228] Unlike Marker, Resnais, or Pasolini, whose right to generalize about African countries they have never seen remains unquestioned, Minh-ha has to justify filming in Senegal: "'Correct' cultural filmmaking usually implies that Africans show Africa, Asians, Asia; and Euro-Americans, … the World."[229] In *Reassemblage,* Minh-ha continually returns to the notion of expertise in her observations of the local men and women as well as European and American travelers to Senegal. Minh-ha's white characters are not the brutal game-hunters who hired Kubelka; they are volunteer workers, missionaries, ethnographers, and academics, people who presume to act on behalf of the communities they visit, yet Minh-ha is just as suspicious of their benevolent humanitarianism.

Minh-ha begins *Reassemblage* by drawing attention to the way that expertise and authority are performed within the most common conventions of language. "I do not intend to speak *about*," she says, "just speak nearby." These conventions exist not only in verbal language, but cinematic language as well. She recites for us "the a, b, c's of photography" as she shows us how to break them. Rather than "stressing the observer's objectivity…[by giving] different views from different angles," as she tells us in the voiceover, Minh-ha uses the close-up, the jump cut, repetition, non-synchronized sound, non-linearity, uncomfortable silences in the soundtrack, and gaping black holes between images to disorient the viewer and disrupt any sense of unmediated

[227] The second film is titled *Naked Spaces: Living is Round,* directed by Trinh T. Minh-ha (1985; New York: Women Make Movies, 2006), DVD. Minh-ha received her undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in the United States, both in ethnomusicology and French literature. For more on Trinh T. Minh-ha's background, see Karen A. Foss, "Trinh T. Minh-ha," *Feminist Rhetorical Theories* eds. Karen A. Foss, Sonja K. Foss, Cindy L. Griffin (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999), 227-229.
[228] Nancy Chen and Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Speaking Nearby," *Feminism and Film*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 319.
[229] Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red,* 69.

access. In her hyper-conscious avoidance of genre and cinematic formulae, Minh-ha produces a style which highlights her own intervention, foregrounding her own subjectivity and the particularity of her perspective.

At the same time, Minh-ha challenges many of the essay film's basic characteristics as inconsistent with the anti-colonial politics it professes. Having built its status on the notion that it could serve as a vehicle for ideas, the essay film produces a structure in which the film speaks *through* its subjects about something else entirely. Minh-ha downplays the need to tie her subjects back to any continuing thread in her film, while her "speak[ing] nearby," underlines the site of Minh-ha's speech rather than its content. For Minh-ha, it is a question of her subjects' autonomy:

> When one is not *just* trying to capture an object, to explain a cultural event, or to inform for the sake of information; when one refuses to commodify knowledge, one necessarily disengages oneself from the mainstream ideology of communication, whose linear and transparent use of language and the media reduces these to a mere vehicle of ideas. Thus, every time one puts forth an image, a word, a sound or a silence, these are never instruments simply called upon to serve a story or a message. They have a set of meanings, a function, and a rhythm of their own within the world that each film builds anew.[230]

If the essay film as a vehicle of ideas was meant to have freed cinema from its marginal status, Minh-ha directs us back to the autonomy of the subjects *from* the essay form itself. Minh-ha suggests that by freeing herself from the need to communicate ideas, she allows her subjects to retain some of their own meaning, life, and independence from her film,

Minh-ha also criticizes the essay film's historical reliance on formalism. Minh-ha compares formalism to a denying one's subjects their freedom, explaining that film, as a:

> "realistically powerful medi[um],… should be linked with the principle of life (and death) by which things, endowed with existential and spiritual force and never static, continue to grow, to change, to renew, and to move. The freedom implied in the internal and external projection of these 'landscapes of life' on canvas, on celluloid, or

[230] Chen, "Speaking Nearby," 324.

> on screen, lies in the availability of mind—and heart—that declines to limit one's perception of things and events to their actual forms."[231]

Minh-ha disputes the notion that the point-and-shoot method of filmmaking is the least invasive. Rather than try to capture the formal qualities of her subjects without any interaction, Minh-ha endorses a more oblique, more time-intensive approach: "Truth never yields itself in anything said or shown. One cannot just point a camera at it to catch it: the very effort to do so will kill it…Truth can only be approached indirectly if one does not want to lose it and find oneself hanging on to a dead, empty skin."[232] As we will see, Minh-ha waits and takes her cues from her subjects, allowing their energy and artfulness guide the film.

In rejecting fundamental aspects of the essay film tradition, Minh-ha is able to celebrate the things that essay film has traditionally suppressed. If women and their laughter were a stumbling block for Pasolini in *An African Orestes*, in *Reassemblage*, women's liveliness is a centerpiece, a joyful resistance against any classicizing, allegorizing, or typifying processes that would restrict their meaning. Minh-ha dedicates much time to showing subjects engaged in ordinary acts, performing chores, talking or playing together, showing most of her subjects in closeup or extreme closeup, in order to highlight details of their gestures, body, hair-style, or clothing. Her camera brings out the aesthetics in everyday life: expressions of grace, joy, intimacy, painted or sculpted forms, the framing of subjects in architectural elements, brief moments of symmetry. She captures her subjects' suspicion of her, their playfulness as they take her measure. Young children bare their teeth and jut out their jaws at her. Minh-ha remarks, "What I see is life looking at me." If Minh-ha has changed much about the essay film in Africa, she does not stray from a tradition that craves the subject's gaze.

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[231] Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red*, 166.
[232] Chen, "Speaking Nearby," 329.

Rather than yoke her images to an argument, Minh-ha frays the possible threads a viewer might try to pick up from the images, linking them with sound rather than a structure of thought. Jump cuts make walkers dance, non-synchronized sounds of celebration make an empty courtyard come alive, and conversations are looped and repeated to make the words --left untranslated-- sound like music. Minh-ha's background as an ethnomusicologist shows in her mixing of songs, rhythms, sounds of working, playing, and talking, while her use of repetition in editing serves to subtly articulate units of time while keeping the meaning of the film making in suspension. On the use of repetition, Minh-ha writes: "When handled creatively, repetition is a way of affirming difference. Rather than using it routinely to reproduce the same, one can use it, to continue saying what one has said, to shift a center, to lighten the burden of representation, to displace a form from its settled location, and to create new passages through the coexistence of moments."[233] Using repetition to draw attention away from the filmmaking and onto the subjects, Minh-ha keeps her camera in a holding pattern in order to allow their subjects' to enter the film on their own terms.

Despite the non-linear style, something of a loose theme emerges: that of women's expertise. Though Minh-ha observes men weaving, rope-making, herding, woodworking, and smithing, women especially draw her focus. She observes their expert gestures while nursing, winnowing, cooking, tidying, shelling peanuts, making tea, and performing child-care. Minh-ha tells us, "In numerous tales, woman is depicted as the one who possessed the fire. Only she knew how to make fire. She kept it in diverse places, at the end of the stick she used to dig the ground with, for example, in her nails or in her fingers." The skill and assertion of her Senegalese subjects contrasts markedly with Minh-ha's depiction of the foreigners she encounters. She mocks a Peace Corps volunteer with headphones over his ears, who tells her about a farming

[233] Qtd. in Corrigan, *The Essay Film*, 82.

technique he has introduced to the women that has failed to yield results. A Catholic nun turns away a man with a sick child from the dispensary on a Sunday. An ethnologist has to remind himself of the name of a particular ethnic group, while another says to Minh-ha, "If you haven't stayed long enough in a place, you are not an ethnologist." In revealing her white subjects incompetence, pride, and callousness, Minh-ha critiques both humanitarian and ethnographic discourse through subtle juxtaposition rather than assertion.

What is conspicuously absent in Minh-ha's composition is the figure of the postcolonial interlocutor, and along with it, the urge for healing and reconciliation between colonized and colonizer. Yet *Reassemblage* does not leave aside the bold political vision of the essay film tradition. Three times throughout the film, Minh-ha cycles through short, 30-60 second sequences that punctuate the film with ominous signs of the precarious nature of rural life in the former colonies. "Scarcely twenty years were enough to make two billion people define themselves as underdeveloped," Minh-ha intones. Skulls grin at us, dead animals in the desert stretched in the stiff arc of a *rigor mortis* pose [Figure 25], a hand guts a fish, and swarms of flies crowd the splayed legs of a decomposing donkey. We see fire on the edge of the forest, apparently untended, seeming to portend the end of women's keeping of the fire, and forms of local --and female--expertise.

Figure 25

In the third and final of these sequences, Minh-ha gives us a faint sign of hope: a horse with a pink tail, mythic in its whiteness and size [Figure 26]. We hear the sound of many pestles hitting mortars as a child cries violently. We see that the white horse has been mounted by a boy who pumps the horse's sides with coiled energy. Is the boy a heroic figure? A sign of the future? Minh-ha refuses to give us a narrative, but we are permitted to glimpse two opposing forces: death and rot working against life, potential, and motion. In her refusal to cater to narratives about white guilt, Minh-ha invents a new narrative thrust for the essay film in Africa, giving social and political purpose to her film without writing a narrative of redemption for the West.

Abandoning the project of the interlocutor does not come without risks. Minh-ha is deeply committed to articulating a feminist perspective, but in doing so, she fails to consider how it might be interpreted from a local or regional perspective. Minh-ha's feminist politics bear the strong influence of *écriture feminine*. First introduced by French theorist Hélène Cixous, *écriture feminine* criticized language as inadequate to the representation of women's bodies and sexuality. Minh-ha quotes Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa" in her book *Woman, Native, Other* : "Women must be heard…must invent the impregnable language that will wreck

partitions, classes and rhetorics, regulations and codes."[234] In an attempt to reclaim language, *écriture feminine* celebrates the properties of the female body considered dangerously erotic or crude as sources of power, joy, and pleasure, in order to transform language from the inside out.

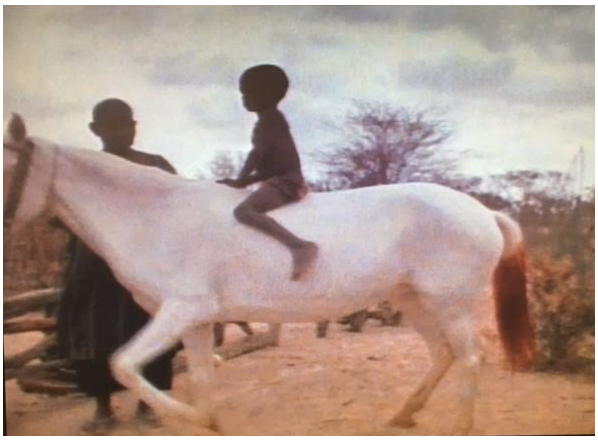

Figure 26

Yet the translation of the principles of *écriture feminine* into the mechanics of the essay film in rural Senegal only serves to exaggerate the inherent hierarchy between viewer and viewed. Minh-ha criticizes the ethnographic film for associating the practice of filming in Africa with "naked-breasted women," and she attempts to reclaim this practice by dedicating a significant portion of the film to filming her own subjects partially nude. We see a beautiful woman fixing her hair, her arms lifted over her head and her chest out, we see a closeup of a woman's nipple moving across her arm, another whose nipples are just visible through symmetrical holes. "Nudity does not reveal the hidden. It is its absence," Minh-ha tells us. Yet the visual games she plays of concealing and revealing, of tactility, of voyeurism make it difficult to separate from the exploitative, particularly when they are going to be shown to cosmopolitan audiences half a world away. Elsewhere, Minh-ha spoken about the importance of context in understanding women's choices to wear headscarves, and it is surprising here that she

[234] Qtd. in Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 37.

does not see bare-breastedness in the same way. What might be common in intimate rural or familial settings might appear differently in the context of a film.[235]

In the translation of *écriture* into cinema, we might ask whether or not Minh-ha's film can tell us anything about local discourses of feminism, particularly since Minh-ha criticizes the practice of polygamy in Senegal in the final moments of the film. Since Minh-ha does not have an interlocutor in *Reassemblage*, to find one, we must search outside the text. We might look, for example, to Senegalese writer Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre/So Long a Letter*, whose literary critique of polygamy was published in 1981, the same year *Reassemblage* was filmed and two years before it was finished.[236] Though Minh-ha finds inventive ways to represent her subjects visually and musically, all of the speech in film comes from a single source: herself. Her subjects' speech goes untranslated, remixed into the rhythm of her composition. Whatever benefits come from this approach, the film provides few links to ongoing African dialogues about the issues it raises. In giving us potential interlocutors speaking nearby rather than speaking, Minh-ha's subjects are still subjected to abstraction-- that of the musical note, remixed to produce sound rather than sense.

Minh-ha's *Reassemblage* shows us an alternative to the search for an African interlocutor. Socially and politically conscious, it shows us an African present and visions of an African future in all its utopian and melancholy registers without resorting to ventriloquism. At the same time, the women of *Reassemblage* are made to carry the aesthetic of *écriture feminine* into a context where it makes little sense, suggesting that the African subject, whether treated as an interlocutor or not, is still subject to projection. Yet if Minh-ha retreats from the attempt to

[235] Nwachukwu Frank Ukadike, for example, has criticized *Reassemblage* for filming "people who can easily be manipulated and their privacy violated without their knowledge." Ukadike, "Africa and the Cinema," *Black African Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 55.
[236] Though Minh-ha writes approvingly of Aminata Sow Fall, she expresses mistrust of "almighty voicegiver" persona of the "socially-oriented filmmaker." Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red,* 169-183.

represent a dialogue with her *subjects*, we might also ask if Minh-ha takes the burden of postcolonial dialogue onto herself. Foregrounding her own subjectivity and experience, Minh-ha is the postcolonial filmmaker in the flesh, come to take aim at the essay film in Africa. But she is not the kind of interlocutor the avant-garde auteur anticipated; her contribution challenges the unspoken norms of the essay film and makes visible the ways in which the form was not prepared to welcome the postcolonial interlocutors it claimed to so anxiously await.

* * *

Conclusion: Canonization and the Postcolonial Filmmaker

In this chapter, I have argued that the avant-garde essay film about Africa has been shaped largely by two separate impulses. First, the essay film perpetuated the avant-garde's legacy by legitimizing cinema as both a vehicle for thought and an instrument of politics. Secondly, it served to propagate the avant-garde's aesthetic values by paving the way for the avant-garde postcolonial filmmaker to come. The notion that its anti-colonial commitment was perfectly consistent with its own self-interest as a movement was an appealing one for the avant-garde filmmaker; yet, as I have shown, the essay film in Africa constantly exposes conflicts between these two objectives. This chapter shows that the relationship between the essayist and the hypothetical African artist to come is more complicated than one of solidarity. Establishing the auteur filmmaker as an aesthetic arbiter, the essay film insists on setting the terms of Africa's assimilation into "modern" aesthetics.

To understand how these conflicts continue to affect the postcolonial essay filmmaker today, we must acknowledge the contemporary essay film's canonization. In an edited volume published in 2017 that was dedicated solely to the essay film, Thomas Elsaesser asks what it means for this once marginal form, now that "we now have something approximating a canon,

with its masters and masterpieces."[237] Though Elsaesser does not, we might also ask what this means for postcolonial film essayists. In a fictionalized dialogue from Minh-ha's *When the Moon Waxes Red*, a voice states that Minh-ha's film reminds him of Kubelka's *Unsere Afrikareise* and of Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil,* to which a different voice, perhaps Minh-ha's, responds: "If she distrusts names and names no master, she will, whether she likes it or not, be given one or several, depending on the donor's whims."[238] In this impressionistic exchange, Minh-ha gives us only a glimpse of her work's reception, but the undercurrent of hostility, racism, and sexism is palpable. Even with the best of intentions, this speaker implies that Minh-ha's work is a mere copy of established films, and presumes that Minh-ha must be the grateful inheritor of an esteemed legacy. Minh-ha takes this as a recognition of her assimilation rather than her contribution to the genre, that the postcolonial filmmaker is not welcomed into avant-garde cinema on equal footing. Having posed the problem itself in the form of a dialogue, Minh-ha seems to draw the focus to her unwilling role as postcolonial interlocutor, to protest the fact that she remains in dialogue with Marker and Kubelka against her will.

Forced to justify her use of the essay film, Minh-ha suggests that the avant-garde project has succeeded all too well. Born seeking recognition for film, the essay film has assured its legacy and its own reproduction for the foreseeable future, but in establishing itself so securely, the essay film presents itself to the postcolonial filmmaker as a finished form. Imagined to be "clamoring on the doorstep... guns or stones checked in with the porter," the postcolonial filmmaker is no longer critical to the perpetuation of the avant-garde or the essay film. Directly related to the essay film and the avant-garde's success is their unwillingness to surrender critical

[237] Thomas Elsaesser, "The Essay Film," 257.
[238] Trinh T. Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red,* 85.

oversight. We can see this conflict at work in the way Catherine Russell prioritizes formal questions over questions of authorship in the context of ethnographic film:

> Within the arena of ethnographic film, "handing the camera over" to a native filmmaker often simply perpetuates the realist aesthetics that experimental film form has dislodged. The "authentic identity" of the film- or video maker is not, in other words, a sufficient revision of ethnographic practice because differences exist within cultures and communities just as surely as they do between cultural identities.[239]

If we can agree with Russell that the identity of the filmmaker cannot in and of itself remake a hegemonic discourse, we might balk at the suggestion that a realist aesthetic by non-white filmmakers is sufficient grounds for anxiety. Russell suggests that camera cannot simply be handed over: it must be bequeathed with specific instructions, with carefully-vetted instructions regarding its place within the Euro-modern tradition. Statements like Russell's perpetuate the avant-garde's sense of stewardship over the camera and its powers and prioritize the conservation of its legacy over access to the medium.

If loss is an ever-present concern in the essay film in Africa--the loss of lives, but more pressingly, it would seem, the loss of culture--we might wonder if the avant-garde took the aftermath of colonialism as a lesson in the impermanence of human creation and the frailty of human efforts. Was this attempt to mourn the "loss" of traditional African culture more acceptable than mourning the loss of a "Western" artistic ideal? Andrew Tracy writes: "To overstate the case, loss is the primary motor of the modern essay film: loss of belief in the image's ability to faithfully reflect reality; loss of faith in the cinema's ability to capture life as it is lived; loss of illusions about cinema's 'purity,' its autonomy from the other arts or, for that

[239] Russell, *Experimental Ethnography,* 11.

matter, the world.[240] Might the essay film mourn Africans and African culture in order to locate loss in its subject, rather than in the form of the essay film itself?

Canonized or not, the avant-garde essay film was always ill-prepared to meet the postcolonial filmmaker in the flesh. An imagined interlocutor is far more useful than a real one: to assert that the gaze staring back at the camera was just as powerful as the camera's served the essay film's self-mythology. The essay film imagined itself as a force for egalitarianism, but what if a postcolonial filmmaker used his platform to reject the avant-garde aesthetic tradition? The elegiac essay film devotes itself to imagining what Africans would one day make themselves, and though it articulates many attributes it would like this art to possess, its strongest preference seems to be for an art of the future. An artist yet to come, delayed by the incomplete project of her accommodation and assimilation into modernity, one who can still perhaps satisfy the desires of the present and fulfill its utopian dreams. These films bear witness to a perpetual deferral of the arrival of the African artist, whose appearance was to mark the fulfillment of the dreams of a troubled modern age.

[240] Andrew Tracy, "*Sight and Sound* 23 no.8 (Aug 2013), http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/features/deep-focus/essay-film.

Chapter 3

Second Nature: Autobiography and Elegy in African Film

"I cannot go to a film without seeing myself. I wait for me. In the interval, just before the film starts, I wait for me. The people in the theater are watching me, examining me, waiting for me."[241]

Autobiography has never been a strong current in francophone African film. With Senegal as the focal point of early francophone African film production, Ousmane Sembene, the prominent Senegalese filmmaker, became the ideological standard bearer for francophone African filmmakers of the 1960s and 1970s. A staunch Marxist, Sembene advocated for a *cinéma engagé*, one which sought to use film's power as a mass medium to bring political issues to the broadest possible African audience. Accordingly, African cinema was expected to serve as a tool of consciousness raising, to advance causes related to the collective struggle, such as neocolonialism and economic exploitation. Prevailing wisdom held that material and political realities were too pressing to devote resources to filming personal narratives; African filmmakers "could not afford to unwind in sentimental and subjective explorations of individual sensations and personal relations when matters of life and death were at stake."[242] [243] Moreover, Sembene's open animosity towards then-President Léopold Sédar Senghor ensured that Francophone African cinema would develop in opposition to the kinds of topics that had dominated the poetry of Senghor and the literature of his cohort. The elements of autobiography found in Negritude poetry and early African literature--black identity, cultural and spiritual alienation, exile, and a crisis of subjectivity, associated with the small group of elite intellectuals in Paris-- were

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[241] Frantz Fanon, "The Fact of Blackness," *Black Skin, White Masks,* trans Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967) 140.
[242] Matthias de Groof, "Black Film Label: Negritude and Cinema," *Third Text* 24 no. 2 (Mar 2010): 251.
[243] By the 1970s, the leadership of the filmmaker's association La Fédération Panafricaine des Cinéastes (FEPACI) took hold, solidifying cinema engagé as dogma. See Chapter 4, "Popular Genre and Political Consciousness" for a brief history of FEPACI and cinema engagé.

interpreted as completely contrary to the currents of leftist politics surging through African cinema.[244]

So strong was the turn from identity and the individual during this period that when a younger generation of filmmakers began to reintroduce these themes, they did so with the utmost caution, self-awareness, self-criticism, but also, less expectedly, with grief. In this chapter, I look at three semi-autobiographical francophone African films that explore the relationship between elegy, identity, and artistic form: Jean Marie Teno's *Hommage/Homage* (1985), Mahamat-Saleh Haroun's *Bye Bye Africa* (1999), and Idrissou Mora Kpai's *Si Gueriki: La reine mere/The Queen Mother* (2003). Each made by a young filmmaker at the beginning of his career, these films follow a very similar template: prompted by the death of a parent, the male protagonist returns home after living abroad for a number of years. Overcoming this geographic separation, he finds himself not only separated from his deceased parent by death, but from his living friends and family by his time away, by the processes of "Westernization" he feels at work on him. Unable to feel at home, the protagonist fears he is unrecognizable, that he has acquired a "second nature," produced not only by growing up and growing out of the home, but by doing so in proximity to the colonizer.

These films, acutely metatextual, are less concerned with alienation as a psychic or social condition than as an artistic one. This second nature is also a literary self, one's reflection in the discourses of African selfhood. In the following chapter, I argue that these films ask us to consider the forms of authorization and credibility at stake in an African artist's relationship to -- and representation of -- identity. In failing to achieve the romantic arc of a "retour au pays natal,"

[244] Sembene's strident opposition to the politics of then-President Léopold Sédar Senghor was no doubt an important factor in his wholesale rejection of his aesthetic legacy.

our protagonists confront the narratives that seem to have already been written for them, the automatic natures they feel compelled to assume and too late to rewrite for themselves.

Yet these films also suggest that film as a medium might be particularly suited to this retrospective look at narratives of identity and alienation, one capable of directly addressing the perceived gap between an artist's concerns and those of a wider audience. By incorporating elements of documentary and vérité, they suggest, contrary to Sembene, that challenging the formulae of African selfhood can and *must* be a collective effort. By bringing bring the construction of selfhood out into the world, these films make the abstract relationships between identity, authenticity, and narrative authority concrete and personal. The subjects of these films, acutely aware of their participation in the processes of authorial authentication and credentialing, use their access to the camera to resist these forces, with women particularly keen to skewer the masculinist tropes of African selfhood.

Finally, I argue that these films use film's temporal dimension to explore the potentially radical and recreative force of the tautology. These voices of dissent are not merely tolerated: they dissolve the narratives in process and divert them to new ends. In response, each of these films is forced to restart itself partway through; the elegies in progress are rededicated, the focus is shifted, and a new film is begun. If these films begin as an elegy manqué, as a means of coping with belated grief, they end by accepting the time lag, by embracing the break in the narrative that lends meaning to repetition and iteration. In their return to the trope of the return, these films suggest that it is in this recurrence that African narratives of the self open themselves up to collective, cooperative authorship and to a new temporal experience of the self.

* * *

Identity, African Authorship, and Time

The first opportunities for African authorship in French came by way of ethnography. Vincent Debaene writes that "literature (in the form of fiction, essays, or poetry collections) was not really a form of expression available to *l'indigene francophone* before the end of the 1930s…The first path - and for many authors, the only one open to them - was ethnography, and quite often, it was ethnographic contributions which authorized literary speech."[245] The colonial government was becoming increasingly interested in the kinds of information that their subjects could provide directly, and had begun soliciting ethnographic and linguistic studies from the colonized themselves. By the late 1930s, African writers like Léopold Sédar Senghor and Paul Hazoumé earned certificates in ethnology from the Institut d'Ethnologie at the Sorbonne[246] before embarking on their literary careers. For writers, ethnographic credentialing allowed them to gain credibility and visibility while developing a professional profile; for the colonial government, it provided a steady stream of information from the colonized about themselves.

It also made these writers easier to control. By serving as a de facto prerequisite to fiction writing, ethnography provided a disciplinary "home" for these writers, ensuring that they could be censured and critiqued by authoritative voices.[247] "[L]imiting their ability to speak within this constrained space was without a doubt a means of ensuring their loyalty before deciding whether to allow them to exercise a freer range of speech," Debaene writes.[248] By design, this arrangement solidified the relationships between educated African elites and colonial authorities, but it also disciplined those elites to retain a cultural foothold in the colonies. "By requiring the author to remain at once faithful to and distant from his origins, this is to say, by calling for an

[245] Vincent Debaene, "Les écrivains contre l'ethnologie?: ethnographie, ethnologie, littérature d'Afrique et des Antilles 1921-1948." *Romanic Review* 104 no. 3 (May/Nov 2013): 359. My translation.
[246] Ibid., 357.
[247] Ibid.
[248] Ibid.

interiorization of an injunction of authenticity, the colonial institution produces the educated subject as one split in two (*le sujet lettré comme dédoublement*)."[249] From the beginning, African authorship in French was predicated on maintaining these dual identitarian claims: the authority to speak, by way of one's fluency in the French ethnographic tradition, and the authenticity to speak as a black man, by virtue of one's (presumed) experiential, autobiographical ethnographic knowledge.

Francophone West African writers secured a platform for authorship by writing literature that closely resembled ethnographic literature. In her analysis of ethnographic tropes in early West African literature, Rhonda Cobham argues that the first West African novelists forged close intertextual links with established ethnographic texts. African writers not only picked up the tropes and conventions--initiation and circumcision rituals in particular-- that had long been used to represent African subjects in European ethnography, they also "turned to anthropological texts as strategic resources for consolidating their narrative authority."[250] By modeling themselves on the figure of the ethnographer, Cobham suggests, these writers were able to craft for themselves a more prestigious role, that of the cultural interpreter, rather than a mere native informant.

One way in which writers achieved this analytical distance from their ethnographic material was to triangulate between an omniscient authorial voice and a naive protagonist. Cobham identifies this practice in Camara Laye's autobiographical *L'enfant noir*, where Laye uses two voices which "serve the development of two quite distinct modes of address in Laye's novel, allowing his narrator to claim the authenticity of the native informant as well as the

[249] Ibid., 365.
[250] Rhonda Cobham, "Forewords and Foreskins: The Author as Ethnographer in Early West African Fiction," *The Locations and Dislocations of African Literature: A Dialogue Between Humanities and Social Science Scholars*, eds. Eileen Julien and Biodun Jeyifo (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2016), 43.

authority of the European ethnographer in representing his community."[251] But Cobham also identifies a counter gesture in the novel's paratext. Originally titled *L'enfant de Guinée,* Laye's publisher changed it to *L'enfant noir,* evoking "the better known "*l'homme noir*" of francophone ethnographic parlance, a term Griaule used in his writings to denote the primitive human essence." With this change in title, the book's potential to be read as modern memoir is lost: "The shift in title obscures the relationship of Laye's fictionalized autobiography to a specific community and historical moment, highlighting instead its generic continuities with a stylized racial Africanity that had its origins in the representations of Africans in the works of European ethnographers."[252] A casualty of the ethnographic imperative, Laye's autobiography--his individuality, the temporality of his own life-- are suppressed as a condition of African authorship.

In the jettisoning of the particular for the general, African literature produced the kind of narratives that could be useful to the social sciences. Simon Gikandi argues that the European social sciences provided the textual tradition through which Africans came to write themselves as modern postcolonial subjects. Midwifed into existence by the social sciences, African literature reproduced itself to fit the models that the social sciences had created for it: "From its beginnings...African literature had a symbiotic relationship to social science: it appropriated and translated the central claims in the Africanist text and reprocessed it [sic] as an African category."[253] For Gikandi, African literature reflects a notion of "African culture" as it had already been produced by the social sciences. "The grand themes of canonical African literature and the modes of knowledge associated with them—the nature of tradition, the influence of

[251] Ibid., 61.
[252] Ibid., 56-57.
[253] Simon Gikandi, "African Literature and the Social Science Paradigm," *The Locations and Dislocations of African Literature: A Dialogue Between Humanities and Social Science Scholars*, eds Eileen Julien and Biodun Jeyifo (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2016), 14.

colonialism on African institutions, cultural conflict, and the crisis of subjectivity—were invented by European social science." The key reference points associated with African literature--concepts of self, community and culture, "stories about individuals who have been displaced from their cultural roots and have been left adrift in an alienating world" -- are impossible to disentangle from the social sciences' textual tradition. Gikandi argues that we should understand African literature as having "emerged in response to, and in an intertextual relation with, other texts...colonial documents, colonial fictions, ethnographic texts, and even a variety of nationalist texts. "[254] Like Cobham, Gikandi questions the notion that African writers could write outside of social science tradition, a discourse in which they had long featured as a subject but never a participant. For Gikandi, the moment at which the African writer was suddenly free to counter the colonial record was the moment he realized he could do nothing else, that he had come too late to do anything but confront the existing edifice of African culture and selfhood.

Yet this sense of belatedness can also be understood as a function of the temporality of African identity as it took shape in African literature. Gikandi points out that the binary opposition between tradition and modernity that has so fundamentally structured the discourse of identity and the African subject is itself a kind of paradoxical temporal category, that there is nothing so modern as the concept of tradition. Unlike the European subject, who is modern through his rejection of tradition, colonial African subjects, Gikandi argues, are "asked to valorize the new but not to negate the historical totalization of their prior experiences which must continue to haunt them into postcoloniality." "Modern" or "post-traditional" African identity according to Gikani "could only be defined in terms of what it had rejected, what the African

[254] Ibid., 13.

subject had lost in the process of becoming modern."[255] The concept of tradition, so fundamental in African discourses of the self, functions for Gikandi only as a sign of mourning of a lost identity, a site where the textual tradition must constantly return to trauma and the remoteness of an authentic self. The detachment from tradition is a ritual that "must reenacted over and over," not as a replication of a singular event but always as "a repetition of earlier repetitions," a reflection of the confinement of African discourses of the self within the social science textual tradition. "Far from gesturing toward an authentic source," Gikandi writes, tradition "points to a site of 'ruination and dispersal' and loss. Tradition is the figure of our anxiety toward our modern identity, the identity colonialism instituted and left incomplete."[256]

How can African writers and African filmmakers re-pose the question of the self in a way that responds to the history of its construction? How to escape the compulsion to repeat the cycle of mourning a mythical past? In his reading of Frantz Fanon's "The Fact of Blackness" (1952), Homi Bhabha suggests that one answer may lie in the attempt to destabilize the temporality of black identity through repetition. Bhaba argues that Fanon's relationship to time and repetition allows him to overcome the "white world" that always interposes itself in black narratives of the self. Having rejected the "[e]cstasy of becoming"[257] offered by the Negritude poets, Fanon struggles with the sense of having "come too late, much too late," of encountering a "meaning that was already there, pre-existing, waiting for me."[258] Fanon's essay, Bhabha interprets as a "performance" of marginalized being, of what it means "to be among those whose presence is 'overlooked'- in the double sense of social surveillance and psychic disavowal--and, at the same time, overdetermined--psychically projected, made stereotypical and symptomatic" but also,

[255] Ibid., 28-29.
[256] Ibid., 30.
[257] Frantz Fanon, "The Fact of Blackness," *Black Skin, White Masks,* trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 125.
[258] Ibid., 134.

more generally, about "the temporality of modernity within which the figure of the 'human' comes to be *authorized*."[259] Bhaba argues that Fanon counters this logic and recalibrates the temporality of modernity through repetition. Bhaba reads "The Fact of Blackness" as an inscription of being that is "iterative and interrogative--a repetition that is initiatory, instating a differential history that will not return to the power of the Same."[260] In self-consciously coming after the fact, in rehearsing the failure of self-definition, Fanon's deeply personal study of black being disrupts the apparent universality of man and the temporal unity of modernity through doubling, by re-iterating it within his own experience and history. In the "time-lag" or "caesura" between iterations, Bhabha tells us, Fanon's act of rearticulation displaces the original utterance, dislodging the script of modern black selfhood.[261]

As Bhabha does with Fanon, I approach the autobiographical films discussed in this chapter as a series of iterations, as films that take the classic narrative of assimilation and alienation and repeat it, returning to it self-consciously and self-critically over the course of the film. In this act of repetition, in this autobiography in duplicate, they dislocate and disjoint the narrative of the African self as one of mourning and loss. In the space between iterations, these films cultivate the pauses and gaps where new sounds, new voices, new stories nudge the familiar scripts of the self off course.

* * *

Dialogue and Digression: Jean-Marie Teno's *Homage*

In 1985, at the Cinéma du Réel documentary festival in Paris, a young Cameroonian filmmaker named Jean--Marie Teno won a prize for his docu-fictional short about a young man returning to his village after his father's funeral. No one was more surprised than Teno, who had

[259] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture,* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 339.
[260] Ibid.
[261] Ibid., 339-340.

not entered the film himself. "*Hommage* is a personal film that was never intended for the public," he has stated. "When my father died in 1979, I could not attend the funeral. This film was a way of paying homage to my father and externalizes my own mourning."[262] Teno explains that he had been in film school at the time and could not afford to come home for over a year. When he finally returned to Cameroon, he found filming to be "a kind of therapy for me, because I had to wait so long to attend my father's funeral." Although the documentary is fictionalized and Teno does not appear as a character, Teno says that his first attempt, a monologue about his father, turned out very "boring." He decided to write a dialogue instead, including conversations he had had with his father before he died.

But *Homage* is more complicated than Teno's description suggests. Embedded in layers of digressive storytelling, Teno's father's death is noted only at the very end of film, the final knot in *Homage*'s unspooling narrative. If *Homage* is a "home movie" in intent, it is nevertheless conscious of a wider audience and their expectations. As we approach the end of the film, we discover new links between a story of individual trauma and Teno's broader observations on exile and cosmopolitanism, the history of decolonization in Cameroon, and the relationship between politics, aesthetics, and loss. Though subtle, Teno's insights on aesthetics and artmaking are critical. Though Teno's father death is clearly a catalytic event in the making of *Homage*, when asked what inspired the film, Teno insists that the question that drove him was, "why am I making films?"[263] We see two competing visions of the film in the dialogue that spans much of the film. Voiced not just by two characters, but two distinct aesthetics, the dialogue represents two artistic voices in disagreement. Their conflicting characterizations of the objects and events in question reflect the larger critical question that looms over this short film: how to represent

[262] Nwachukwu Frank Ukadike, "Jean-Marie Teno (Cameroon)," *Questioning African Cinema: Conversations with Filmmakers* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 302.
[263] Ibid., 303.

loss, particularly in film, where presence before the lens counts for everything? *Homage* suggests that loss not only changes a person, risks estranging them from themselves, but changes the way they experience the world. If artmaking serves as a form of therapy for Teno, *Homage* asks how film might serve as recompense for loss by--haltingly, tentatively--bringing a new story into the world.

Though he has produced both feature and documentary films throughout his long career, Jean-Marie Teno is primarily known as a documentarian, and he insists that all his works, even the feature films, are documentaries.[264] Though Teno's films are often difficult to classify as strictly fictional or factual, his work always reflects his commitment to telling large-scale social histories as they reveal themselves in the personal, the local, and the particular. Originally from Cameroon, Teno began his career while living and working in France as an editor at the television station France 3. At the time he made *Homage*, his first film to garner public acclaim, Teno had already been trying his hand at short films for a few years. In 1992, Teno's first feature-length documentary, *Afrique, Je te plumerai*/*Africa, I Will Fleece You*, was the first example of the distinctive style that would come to characterize Teno's career. A non-linear collage of authorial modes, including direct address, interview, archival clips, and reenactment, *Africa, I Will Fleece You* treats the topic of colonialism in Cameroon and its cultural legacy, particularly in publishing.

In his subsequent career, Teno has been prolific, treating a wide range of topics, though always remaining politically committed. In *Clando/Clandestine* (1996), a feature film, Teno links political repression and economic desperation in Cameroon with emigration to Europe, exploring the emotional toll that the decision to leave or to return can take. *Chef!/Chief!* (1999), a

[264] Ibid., 302. See also Ray Privett, "Jean-Marie Teno and Anti-Documentary." *Black Camera* 13 no. 2 (Fall/Winter 1998): 5.

documentary, explores the hierarchies that structure life in Cameroon, from the national level down to the local and even within the family unit. *Vacances aux pays/A Trip To the Country* (2000) returns to the idea of the return, chronicling a trip from the capital, Yaounde, back to Teno's hometown in the western Cameroon, and cataloging the uneven nature of modernity and technological development along the way. *Le mariage d'Alex/Alex's Marriage* (2003), treats a polygamous wedding, *Le malentendu colonial*/*The Colonial Misunderstanding* (2004) excavates the history of German colonialism in Africa, *Lieux Sacrés*/*Sacred Places* (2009) explores film culture in the poor outskirts of Ouagadougou, and a *Leaf in the Wind*/*Une feuille dans le vent* (2013), paints a portrait of Ernestine Ouandié, the daughter of Ernest Ouandié, an important Cameroonian political figure who was executed by the Ahmadou Ahidjo regime. In this brief snapshot of Teno's career, it is already possible to see that the themes that Teno would address in so many different contexts throughout his long career were already present in *Homage*'s thirteen-minute exposition: the return home, memory and mourning, and the trauma of colonial history as it manifests in everyday life.

Homage begins *in medias res*, with an unseen speaker chastising a young boy for failing to draw water as he was asked. We do not meet any characters formally, but our setting is clearly rural, and the speaker's name is Dieunedort. Perhaps Dieunedort is an older man, like the one whose image briefly flashes across the screen. Though we do not see him, Dieunedort's personality seems to reside primarily in his voice, delivered in the exaggerated expressiveness of a character actor's style, ranging from the deep and gravelly to the light and melodic. Rather than allowing us to see Dieunedort, Teno has us see through his eyes, the people he addresses, the settings he describes.

Dieunedort reveals that he is old enough to remember an earlier time, a time when youth still respected their elders: "You'll be old too one day, he tells the malingerer. "Life isn't always young and sweet." Dieunedort associates this bygone era with a character known as Ta'a Souop, who we gather is no longer alive. Very little is said about this character, and yet his importance is underscored by repetition. His name is uttered twice by Dieunedort, and finally a third time when he begins thinking of his friend Boniface, a man who left and never saw this character Ta'a Souop before he died. Why this matters is a plot point that Teno leaves unresolved for nearly the entire film, until we have almost forgotten it was ever mentioned. Instead of clarifying *Homage*'s storyline at the beginning, Teno uses these opening scenes to set a melancholy, contemplative mood, in which Dieunedort will recall for us the day he was reunited with Boniface after the latter's long absence.

Boniface appears to us in the guise of a black-and-white photograph of a young boy, posing alongside another boy--perhaps Dieunedort. The two boys grew up together, Dieunedort tells us, but they followed different paths: "When the village called me [Dieunedort] to farm, Boniface traveled afar: Douala, Yaounde, France, and god knows where else." When Boniface returns, years later, Dieunedort meets him by chance in the nearby town of Baffousam. Dieunedort recounts how he left early one morning, and the camera shows us the lush green fields he passes through, and the field laborer he greets, all on his way to the bustling town center. The contrast between the village and the town is marked, and Dieunedort makes sure we notice. His description of the *gare*, the bus and car hire depot where he meets Boniface, is packed with sensory detail. He tells us that it is bedlam, "a meeting place for everyone." As he describes the sights and smells, Teno shows us street scenes: women cooking, smoke rising off heaps of grilled meat and buses piled with luggage, as we hear the sound of men squabbling over

parking spots. When he sees Boniface, he repeats, "Today, it really *is* the meeting place for everyone ["tout le monde": literally, "the whole world"].

With Boniface's entry into the narrative, we see the first signs of conflict between the two friends, and as they continue to talk, the gap between them only widens. Though they greet each other with genuine warmth, Boniface's cosmopolitanism registers with Dieunedort immediately. Like Dieunedort, we never see Boniface, but his voice-- a Parisian French so conspicuous compared to Dieunedort's Cameroonian lilt--tells us all we need to know. Boniface shocks Dieunedort by referring to Baffousam as a "village." As Boniface speaks, we look out on Baffousam from a new vantage point: we are suddenly at a higher elevation, a point from which it does appear smaller, calmer, and more picturesque [Figure 27]. From this promontory, we hear Boniface address the town in a reverie: "How beautiful you are! You are still just as beautiful, Baffousam, so sure of your charm. It's as if you were saying to me, 'Leave, go anywhere! You'll return to find me here." Channelling a poetic voice, Boniface not only personifies Baffousam, he feminizes it, sexualizes it, by treating it as the waiting woman who keeps chaste while he is away. If Boniface's words seem to recall Senghor's famous poem "Femme noire" which figures an African homeland as a waiting woman, Boniface nevertheless prefers to imagine this feminized land as one that is never lost. If the "fleeting beauty" in Senghor's poem turns to ash, Boniface is comforted by a view of Baffousam that suggests that time has not touched it.

Figure 27

Dieunedort's response to his Boniface's romanticism is to display a heightened class consciousness. He is not put initially put off by his Boniface's new status--in fact, it emboldens him to ask for his friend to buy them a round of beer-- but Dieunedort's materialist perspective grows increasingly combative. To remind him that life is hard in Baffousam, Dieunedort takes Boniface to a poorer neighborhood, but Dieunedort refuses to be dissuaded. At the sight of furniture makers laboring, Boniface exclaims that "they are doing the work they love!" The laborer's voice responds that there is not much money in it, but Boniface insists. Teno here seems to take Boniface's side, showing the craftsman's tender handling of the wood, accompanied by a simple but affecting soundtrack. Dieuenedort reminds Boniface that working in Baffousam is hard labor for little money, in the heat and the rain, not like "the easy money you bring back from Douala, Yaounde, and France." Now Teno shows us different laborers: hunched, swatting flies, covered in paint, all to the background music of street noise, chatter and shouting. This disagreement between Dieunedort and Boniface, represented as a contest of images, manifests not simply a difference in politics, but a difference in artistic vision. In these everyday documentary images we see before us--urban spaces, working class homes, laborers--

we see two alternating aesthetic perspectives, a nativist one, and a realist, materialist one, perspectives that quite literally produce different images, different sounds, and different framing.

Yet Dieunedort cannot accept that Boniface should fail to understand the problems he left behind, and the accusation that is at first unspoken between friends is finally uttered: "Why did you leave?" Boniface attributes his departure to a lack of resources in Baffousam, describing a growing population increasingly strained to provide for itself. Now it is Boniface who punctures Dieunedort's romantic vision of life abroad. Not everyone can inherit the land, Boniface says, "the rest--all the others-- have to leave, to get by somewhere else, to make ends meet." Still images of crowded bus depots repeat themselves, of people loaded with burdens, scrambling to load themselves into passenger vans [Figure 28]. But Dieunedort interrupts Boniface emphatically: "No, no, I disagree. There is enough land in the village for *everyone*." As he speaks the camera moves upward, to reveal a helping hand reaching out to help the travelers with their burdens [Figure 29]. "Why did you leave?" The question's simplicity is deceiving: contained within it is an uncertainty about the integrity of the self, agency and victimhood, the role of the individual in the midst of social and historical forces. What forces cause the movement of bodies across borders, across oceans? And who should bear the burden of the consequences?

Figure 28

For Boniface, these questions necessarily trace back to a historical question: what was decolonization? Boniface begins a monologue about the changes that have taken place since the colonial period. “Parents no longer say to their children, ‘Study, my son, you’ll grow up to be like a White.’” For the first time, rather than observing the area around our characters, we see archival images, black and white footage of huge masses of people: streets full of cars being directed by a police officer, stands full of people, of children doing synchronized exercises [Figure 29], parades and motorcades. We seem to be witnessing a historical memory, perhaps via Boniface’s mind’s eye, a vision which overrides the time and space of our characters. Boniface becomes increasingly animated, whooping and laughing maniacally. “We became independent!” Then he repeats himself, now softly, “We became independent.” As the images multiply, a theme of mass coordinated action emerges: children march in unison, men in a packed phalanx shadowbox in the same direction, heads bob in a large crowd, craning to see something out of frame. “Black brutality replaced white brutality,” Boniface accuses. “We are fearful, and so we are quiet. And the more we are fearful, the more we are quiet, the more we are quiet, the more we fear, and the more we fear the more we keep quiet!” No one speaks out because they are accustomed to violence now, Boniface suggests. His voice sounds emotional, even disturbed. “Habit becomes second nature,” he repeats again. “Habit becomes second nature.” A climactic scene, Boniface’s monologue asks us to think about the ways in which the decolonized have been disciplined to maintain the cycle of violence and oppression they suffered under colonialism, and his use of repetition--repeated words and phrases, the repetitive actions of the images-- hints at the cyclical nature of these automatized behaviors.

Figure 29

Boniface's monologue also signals the end of the dialogue between the friends, insofar as we are privy to it. Dieunedort tells us that Boniface is no longer really listening to him, and that he, Dieunedort, does not really understand what Boniface is saying. In this breakdown of communication, we return to the setting from the beginning of the film, where the boy is fetching water, and the final four minutes of the film is recounted by Dieunedort, through his memory, and his voice alone. What Dieunedort needs to communicate to us will help us understand Boniface's behavior, why he in particular appears so deeply traumatized by the events of decolonization. Dieunedort explains how he told Boniface about the "last village celebration." Now it is Dieundort's turn to speak in comforting, nostalgic tones, explaining how delicious the food was, how everyone danced and sang, how the men pretended to negotiate disputes, descriptions illustrated by still photographs of the preparations and celebrations. Superimposed on these images, we begin to make out a face, a black-and-white portrait, a man who continues to stare out at us as the celebratory images change [Figure 30]. It is only in the final minutes of the film that we learn that this festival was intended to "render a final homage" to a man who died in a grim traffic accident. Dieunedort's tender, rose-colored description was for the benefit of

Boniface. The funerary festival honored Boniface's father, who died in an accident while Boniface was still abroad.

Figure 30

The final scene of *Homage* can be considered a subtle commentary on the relationship between a traumatic event and aesthetics. In this film about the nature of absence, trauma, and representation, Teno chooses to recreate the accident of Boniface's father in a color painting [Figure 31]. It shows a busy, daytime street scene, like many that have appeared throughout *Homage*. A man hauls sacks of rice, people cross the street, chat, and make their purchases, unaware that a tragedy is taking place in their midst. Hidden in this genre scene, in which everyone is occupied with daily activities, a man is being run over by a bus. Though it is central to the scene, no one in the painting notices, not even the bus riders, and even though viewers of the film are primed to see it, it is easy to miss. We learn that the man was taken to the hospital only after two hours. "Two hours!" Dieunedort repeats. "And there, they expected him to get up and buy his own rubbing alcohol and bandages," Dieunedort accuses. All these witnesses, the viewer included, become accomplices; if only someone could have seen the violence unfolding before their eyes and done something. Habit becomes a second nature: if someone had looked up from their work, if the hospital had shown human kindness, if a bystander had not been so inured

to unconscious habits of violence and disrespect for human life, a man might have been saved. This is why, Teno seems to suggest, art works in retrospect: it reconstructs, reflects, repeats the tragedies of everyday life in its own time, halting the thoughtless, cyclical habits of the moment to show the tragedies left in their wake.

Figure 31

Through the characters of Dieunedort and Boniface, the man who stayed and the man who left, Teno explores the complicated nature of postcolonial identity. The dialogue between the two characters, waxing then waning, provides a nuanced exploration of the choices that decolonization presented and the ways in which the formerly colonized may struggle to understand how their own individual decisions contribute to the social consequences of history and vice versa, how unseen historical forces shape our personal lives and behavior. Ultimately the personal dimension of Teno's film is unspoken: it is only implied in the dedication that Boniface's father is a figure for Teno's, who also "passed away accidentally," as the final text reads. The final image of the film is that of Teno's father's portrait, whose direct gaze seems to exhort us to abandon our passivity.

Yet *Homage* also interrogates the nature of postcolonial *artistic* identity-- the artist's choices and the discourses which lend them credibility. Teno not only finds his own aesthetic

identity in his care and attention to his subjects and characters, in his sensitivity to their differing perspectives, he finds a new way of using film's temporal qualities to allow them to unfold over time. The opposition between nativism and Marxist materialism that structured the discourse in early francophone African aesthetic production is rehearsed, but ultimately revealed to be a kind of diversion. Through *Homage'*s dialogic narrative and digressive structure, with its slow revealing of details, its repetition, its dual homages to Boniface's father and to his own, Teno explores the possibility of aesthetic re-presentation as a means of re-sensitizing viewers to the images that they see and the unthinking narratives that structure their world. Teno allows his characters, his settings, and his film to develop in multiples, an aesthetic of generosity that reflects, perhaps, his own belief in art's compensatory power.

* * *

Those Who Feed You: Realism and Reciprocity in Mahamat-Saleh Haroun's *Bye Bye Africa*

In Mahamat-Saleh Haroun's *Bye Bye Africa*, "Haroun," a Chadian filmmaker living in France who is played by the filmmaker himself, learns of his mother's death and plans a trip back home to Chad to see his family.[265] While in Chad, Haroun engages in activities that we might expect the real Mahamat-Saleh Haroun to do. He corresponds with real--life director Jean--Pierre Fila, he visits the filmmaker Issa Serge Coelo on the set of his film *Daresalam* (2000), and he begins filming a movie called "Bye Bye Africa." What might seem at first to be a cinematic translation of the concept of autofiction, a fictionalization of memoir, reveals itself to be something more complicated. In an interview from 2013, Haroun states that he wanted to "attain a certain degree of realism ("vérité") in telling a story about myself…. there is an aspect

[265] For clarity's sake, I use "Haroun" to refer to the fictional character and "Mahamat-Saleh Haroun" to refer to the filmmaker.

of autobiography in certain small things, except for the death of my mother. My mother is living."[266] Though it assumes the guise of autobiography and the seriousness of its elegiac subject, *Bye Bye Africa* parodies the memoir. From the very first sequence, which captures the moment Haroun is informed of his mother's death in the middle of the night, we are forced to reckon with the strangeness of this moment of urgency and emergency committed to film: a phone ringing with bad news and a camera sitting ready in middle of a pitch-black room.

Amid these moments of unreality in the documenting of Haroun's return to Chad, the "realism" to which Mahamat-Saleh Haroun refers is one that enters the film at the margins, almost undetected, around the main narrative thread. In the doubling of Haroun's persona-- his role as character and as authorial presence, an aspiring filmmaker and one in the process of filming--a gap, both temporal and spatial, opens up and allows other people, other lives, other narratives into the film. By weaving a realistic documentary aesthetic into a scripted, semi-autobiographical drama, Mahamat-Saleh Haroun sets up an analogy between the construction of an authorial self and the vast network of relations, both social and economic, without which cinema could not exist. Mahamat-Saleh Haroun jokes that "writers used to talk a lot about mothers. Mothers should have like, rights! You write a story, you should share a certain percent with your mother."[267] Mahamat-Saleh Haroun gets at the heart of *Bye Bye Africa*'s attention to the myriad supportive relationships that make art possible: from family and friends to cast and crew, to cinephiles and aspiring actors, to service workers and taximen.

Haroun's return to Chad prompts an internal crisis both of authorship and authenticity, as he struggles to meet the professional demands of filmmaking (securing subjects, actors, and

[266] "Mahamat-Saleh Haroun: Film Independent at LACMA," Interview, 20:19, from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's "Caméras d'Afriques" series, posted by Film Independent, October 14, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vft4pqmbiOA.
[267] Ibid.

funding) in a country still reeling from civil war and to justify, both to himself and to others, his motives for making art. It is only by recognizing the collective nature of filmmaking, not simply the industry but also the people and communities--cast, crew, projectionists, cinephiles, their families and neighborhoods-- that support an indigenous cinema culture, that Haroun is able to embrace a new aesthetic of reciprocity, a mode of filmmaking built on sustaining the communities that make it possible.

The cinema of Mahamat-Saleh Haroun is well known for its study of the family dynamic, particularly as it strained by death, war, and economic desperation. His careful attention to gender politics focuses especially on men and boys as they respond to situations of extreme tragedy and loss, particularly as it plays out through the father-son relationship. *Abouna/Our Father* (2002) follows two brothers as they struggle to make sense of their abandonment by their father. *Daraat/Saison Seche/Dry Season* (2006) tells the story of Atim, a young man trying to avenge his father by killing his father's murderer, a man named Nassara, who unexpectedly becomes Atim's surrogate father figure. *Un homme qui crie* (2010) explores a father's feelings of jealousy toward his son against the backdrop of Chad's Civil War (2005-2010) and the disastrous wartime economy. Often, as is the case in Haroun's *Gris-Gris* (2013), Haroun's characters are desperate to maintain some kind of moral and ethical ground amidst social and economic upheaval, and concepts of reconciliation, justice, reconstruction are tested as characters try to build and maintain supportive relationships in fragile wartime and postwar environments.

Though his feature films are his best known, Haroun has also produced documentaries. His most recent documentary, *Hissein Habré, une tragédie tchadienne* (2016) addresses human rights abuses Chadians suffered under Habré, the former president. In the film, Haroun interviews the survivors of torture, often alongside their torturers, that is, the people living in the

same community who became torturers under Habré's regime. Framed not as a confrontation, but as an attempt to heal the personal bonds between people instrumentalized by state forces, Haroun's documentary explores the nature of victimhood and the resiliency of communities and social bonds that have been tested to the extreme. Haroun also produced a number of documentaries in the very earliest years of his filmmaking career. After working in radio and print journalism in France,[268] Haroun made his first full length film, a documentary about the Burkinabé actor Sotigui Kouyaté. *Sotigui Kouyaté, A Modern Griot* (1995), follows the actor as he makes his way from France and the expatriate artistic community there where he lives and works back home to Burkina Faso after a thirty-year absence. *A Modern Griot* was Haroun's first opportunity to ask what it means to make art abroad, as Haroun himself does, and to explore the emotional currents of exile and return.

Bye Bye Africa, Haroun's first full-length feature film, returns to these questions. Like Kouyaté, Haroun is surrounded by a community of expatriates in France who serve as Haroun's lifeline when he hears the news of his mother's death. In his first voiceover to the viewer after having learned of his mother's death, Haroun tells us: "Now, suddenly, I feel very alone. Very alone." Yet in the next scene, he is surrounded by friends, who have come to grieve with him and give him a check to help with his expenses. We see that Haroun is well supported within his expatriate community of like-minded peers. In this moment of communal mourning, Haroun is open about his grief and his ambivalence about living so far from home. Haroun tells his friends: "When you choose to live far from your family, from those you love, you must accept that you may not see them when they die. And that's what is the most difficult thing to accept." Haroun expresses not only grief, but guilt, reproaching himself with the knowledge that he had already

[268] Roy Armes, "Mahamat Saleh Haroun," *African Filmmaking: North and South of the Sahara* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 159.

subconsciously relegated himself to mourning his mother from afar. Perhaps the most intimate, vulnerable statement on mourning that Haroun makes during the film, it is telling that Haroun can only express himself this freely while still in France, among other exiles and artists.

By contrast, when Haroun arrives in Chad, we are not privy to Haroun's initial reunion with his father. By the time we see them, they sit in the courtyard together, stiffly, at right angles to one another. The camera, equally tense, observes Haroun asking about his mother's death, but shows us little of the complex of rooms that surrounds them. Only when Haroun's grandmother calls out from an adjoining room do we have some sense that open doorways surround the father and son. In yet another contrast, when Haroun visits his friend Garba in the following scene, Garba and Haroun embrace warmly, and they say a prayer together for Haroun's mother. Then Garba drives Haroun to the cemetery, and waits for him while he goes to his mother's grave. In contrast to the distant relationship between Haroun and his father, his relationship with Garba is a testament to their strong friendship, sustained over many years and over great distances. Garba is a former projectionist and the man whom Haroun credits for his love of cinema. As the film goes on, we see that Garba plays a crucial role in Haroun's ability to film, quite literally supporting his camera while the two friends share a motorcycle [Figure 32], but also providing emotional support, companionship, and even medical care, bandaging Haroun's wound when he is injured.

Figure 32

If Garba provides unconditional care and support for Haroun, Haroun's father represents a voice of criticism and questioning. Haroun's father struggles to understand Haroun's desire to make films that have little to do with one's own life. When Haroun talks about his interest in Sigmund Freud and Jean-Luc Godard, his father asks if they are his friends. Haroun's father accuses him of making films that make sense only to white people, and Haroun's only response is to raise his camera in front of his face like a mask [Figures 33] and turn in the opposite direction. Nearly always positioned at right angles to one another, Haroun and his father seem incapable of having a substantive discussion. Haroun's father serves to reinforce the self-recrimination that Haroun already feels: "If only you'd become a doctor you could have helped your mum...Of what use is a camera? The day you think you belong there [in France], you'll lose your soul." It is an accusation of betrayal, a barely concealed hostility to Haroun's authorship, a colonizer's power. For his father, Haroun's camera is a mask, a white mask, behind which he hides from his true self.

Figure 33

In attempt to resolve these mounting tensions, Haroun decides to make a film in Chad. With a muezzin's call to prayer and a minaret in the background, Haroun answers the call to cinema, telling us in voiceover that he will make the film in memory of his mother [Figure 34]. Though he has been collecting images since he arrived in N'Djamena, Haroun now goes out to shoot the cinemas of his youth, now little more than ruins in the wake of the civil war. Visiting the cinemas of his youth, L'Étoile, le Normandie, and le Shéhérazade, Haroun finds celluloid graveyards, kicked--in seats, and collapsed ceilings [Figures 35 and 36]. In the cinemas, Haroun interviews cinema owners and ticket buyers (in a cinema that is still operational), asking them about the problems they see with rebuilding Chadian cinema. From them we gain a greater sense of Chadians who do love cinema and want to work for an indigenous industry. They are emotional, their voices full of passion, nostalgia, a sense of shared grief but also resolve. The owner of the L'Étoile, set on renovating it despite the challenges. says to Haroun: "If you make

the movies, then we also can try and promote cinema." In exploring these melancholy spaces, Haroun not only dispels the notion that cinema does not belong in Chad, he begins to trace the outline of a scattered community, a collectivity united by the love of cinema and their faith in its importance to Chad.

Figure 34

Figures 35 and 36

Yet outside the theater is a very different atmosphere, one in which the aggression and violence of the war have not yet dissipated. Outside Le Normandie, we see a group of young

men get into a fist fight. Later, as Haroun is filming outside le Shéhérazade along with Garba, he is assaulted by a man, who hits Haroun with his own camera and then tries to take it from him. "He's stealing our images!" the man says. "Thief! Why film us?" "He is a stranger," someone murmurs. "He doesn't know better.' Garba tries to convince the man to give the camera back, "Is it a fight you want?" The man agrees, but in doing so, he looks directly into the camera and warns Haroun never to film again. "You know what it means to steal the image of the Other [de l'Autre]?" He is a surreal figure, like a manifestation of Haroun's drama of the psyche, his fear that neither he nor cinema has a place anymore in Chad, that war has made their existence in Chad impossible. Cast as the foreigner, the ethnographer, Haroun hears the words of this man echo through his mind repeatedly, an obsessive fear that all his efforts are nothing more than the result of a racial complex, a white mask he has made for himself. Yet, Haroun is surprised to hear from Garba that this man's fear is justified, that cinematic images can be very dangerous in post-war N'djamena. "People distrust the camera," Garba says. "There's a problem with images. They aren't able to see the difference between fiction and reality." In fact, Garba mentions to Haroun that a female actor who played in his previous film, Isabelle, has been ostracized because she played a character with AIDS, and that he must consider his responsibility to help her, since she was ruined by helping him.

Haroun's relationship to Isabelle reflects his close association between cinema and women. Haroun says of his and Garba's early movie attendance: "We would come for the movies but also the pretty girls. Cinema and beautiful women were our "deux mamelles nouricières" (literally, "two nourishing breasts"). Sources of sustenance, pleasure, and satisfaction for his teenage years, cinema and women come together in this ultimate image of maternal virtue, the two nourishing breasts of Charity which never refuse an infant. It is telling

that after this revelation about Isabelle, Haroun happens to hear a radio program that commemorates the anniversary of Thomas Sankara's death with an excerpt from one of his speeches:

> We have to produce. Produce more because, of course, those who feed you also have their demands. Where is imperialism? Look on your plate when you eat: imported rice, corn, and millet. Imperialism lies there. Go no further. This aid creates a spoon-fed mentality that we reject. But production, although I mentioned cereals is not limited to agriculture. We must produce in all areas. in factories and offices. That includes cultural production.

We might immediately seize on the latter part of Sankara's speech about cultural production, as highlighting the importance of Haroun's interest in rebuilding Chadian cinema. But the story of Isabelle and evocation of motherhood may prime us to look to the beginning: "those who feed you also have their demands." Rather than conceiving of a cinema fueled by the inexhaustible virtues of feminine sustenance and support, Sankara's words suggest an alternative: a form of creative, cultural production as an act of reciprocality, of nourishing those who provide nourishment.

The themes of nourishment, support, and sustenance run through the entirety of *Bye Bye Africa*, though they are easy to miss. These scenes are often quiet and seemingly unremarkable, such as one moment in which Haroun and Garba are eating lunch at a restaurant. We see a man grilling the meat, a woman fetches cold drinks from a cooler at Garba's request, while another woman sits on the floor, braiding the hair of a child in her lap. At one point, Haroun remarks that Garba has given up on Chadian cinema culture, that now he prefers "to cultivate tomatoes." When we first meet Haroun's nephew Ali, who we later learn wants desperately to be a filmmaker, he is waiting on his great-grandmother, who only moves with great difficulty and relies on her great-grandson's constant care. Later we see Ali giving his uncle Haroun a massage, and it is at this moment that he asks Haroun if he can have his camera, only to be met with

Haroun's scorn. These men, women, and children who serve others-- taxi drivers, gardeners, servers, and vendors--are ever-present in the world of *Bye Bye Africa,* part of the fabric of the realistic world in which it takes place, and yet they are invisible if one fixates on the main narrative thread. The more we focus on Haroun's narrative of the self, the less likely we are to see Mahamet-Saleh Haroun's quiet exploration of the themes of service and care.

Yet Haroun remains unwilling to give back to those who have supported him, and unwilling to help those who ask for his assistance. Haroun consistently refuses Ali's attempts to learn about cinema from him, eventually dumping him on Issa Serge Coelo's set to get rid of him. We see a young beggar ask Haroun for alms in vain, even though Haroun has just come from the office of a rich Chadian businessman, where he too begged for funds. In another sequence, Haroun puts out a call for actors, giving them screen tests. The call is wildly successful: we see men and women waiting in the hot sun for an opportunity to be in his films [Figures 37-38]. When they get in front of Haroun's camera, they are passionate about cinema, willing to work hard and sacrifice for their art. They see no contradiction between cinema and Chadian culture. Yet Haroun squanders this opportunity by insisting that his female actors consent to act nude, an artistic choice stubbornly contrary to local norms. We watch their hopeful expressions fall, and we can see tears in one woman's eyes when she realizes she won't be able to pursue acting. Haroun is unwilling to imagine a cinema that sustains the communities with whose labor it is built; he can only imagine a cinema that is exploitative.

Figures 37 and 38

But it is Haroun's relationship with Isabelle that generates the real tragedy of *Bye Bye Africa*. When Haroun is reminded of Isabelle, he remembers her as a great beauty, a lover he took when she "must have been no more than seventeen": "Isabelle, I had forgotten her...I remember her lovely expression, her long, ebony legs, and the gracefulness of her body, her wild body." When he meets her again, he tries to rekindle a sexual relationship. Much as Boniface regarded Baffousam, for Haroun, Isabelle is the waiting woman, available to him no matter where he goes and how long he stays away. Yet Isabelle is in fact greatly changed. Where the female actors at the casting call refuse to act for Haroun knowing it will destroy their personal lives, Isabelle did not, and she has been driven to ruin because of it. Haroun declines to help her, and their relationship ends when he humiliates and abandons her.

It is only when Isabelle decides to kill herself, stealing Haroun's camera to record her suicide note, that Haroun begins to change his attitude. After her death, as he prepares to return to France, he decides to give his camera away to Ali. "Pay very close attention to what you film," he tells him. Thus it is Ali's first cinematic attempt which closes out *Bye Bye Africa*, and Ali chooses to film a character for whom *he* provides care, a character whose voice has existed in the margins of the film so far, but has never been seen on film: Haroun's grandmother, Ali's great-grandmother [Figure 39]. Haroun tells us in voiceover that she only leaves her room and the warmth of her white blanket twice a day, to use the toilet and to pray. We observe her halting movement as her silhouette inches down the hall, the walls she uses to support herself like the frame of lens' shutter. Haroun tells, "This woman raised me. She taught me how to tell stories. I often think of her when I'm far away. I just have to close my eyes to hear her soft voice." In the end, it is the great-grandmother who emerges from the margins to briefly occupy the center of the frame. The mother figure, whose absence has haunted the film but whose spirit of support sustains it, is not made into a romantic origin of cinema's indigenous roots. She appears only as a spare outline; her image, as Haroun tells us, is unimportant as her voice can be recalled with even the most primitive of cinematic technologies, the closed eyes.

Figure 39

The end of *Bye Bye Africa* reaffirms the notion of a cinema of reciprocity and exchange. By giving the camera to Ali, Haroun tells him that they can now exchange videocassettes by mail, so that they can send family news to each other even when Haroun is in France. But Haroun also plans to return, to come back to film "Bye Bye Africa," an indication that Haroun plans to participate in the effort to rebuild Chad's postwar cinema culture. In fact, partly due to the success of Mahamat-Saleh Haroun's films, the Chadian government funded renovations of Le Normandie, reopening it in 2011.[269]

Bye Bye Africa's contribution to African autobiographical narratives of the self is one that follows many of the genre's tropes: the doubled self, alienation and self-doubt, the return, and the supportive, stabilizing force of maternal figures. And yet, the film stages these tropes only to quietly diverge from them. Though the film seemed at first to elegize Haroun's mother, the tragic death that Haroun chastised himself for accepting in advance, it ends by mourning the loss of Isabelle, sacrificed because her own sacrifice for cinema and for Haroun went unreciprocated. If Isabelle's death weighs heavily on the end of the film, reminding us of the serious responsibility that comes with authorial power, it is leavened with some signs of hope, with the images of friendship, service, and love that increasingly move into frame in the final moments of the film. The supporting roles, passerbys, incidental characters who appear at first to be part of the setting, merely existing to lend realism to Haroun's journey of self-discovery, ultimately take center stage. In transforming a narrative of authorial self-construction into a self-critical reflection on the nature of post-war Chadian cinema, *Bye Bye Africa* suggests that African narratives of the self need not be self-absorbed, that the instability of the self can nudge our gaze outward to the edges of the frame, allowing us to see new possibilities for relationships of mutual strength and support.

[269] Olivier Barlet, *Contemporary African Cinema* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2016), 340.

* * *

Desegregating the Self: Idrissou Mora Kpai's *Si Gueriki: The Queen Mother*

In Idrissou Mora Kpai's *Si Gueriki: The Queen Mother* (2002), Kpai introduces himself as a young filmmaker from Beroubouay (in the Borgu region of Benin) who goes to Germany for his studies. His father, a nobleman of the Wassangari people, dies while Kpai is away, and now that Kpai is finally able to return home, he decides to make a film in his father's honor. Upon arriving home, Kpai struggles with the inopportuneness of his task, the inconvenience of memorializing a man already dead and gone, and his mother, Bougnon, now his primary source of information about his father, chafes at her assigned role. Bougnon insists that Kpai "should have come to do this work sooner. Many people have died." According to Bougnon, the story of Kpai's patriarchal lineage passed away with an earlier generation of men who are long gone. The only people left to help him are his mother, her co-wife Bona, Kpai's divorced sister, and her daughters--the women of the family--with whom Kpai has had very little contact. Within the Wassangari, life is mostly gender segregated, and the young Kpai was kept close to his father and away from his mother in order to instill the masculine norms he was expected to embody.

Unlike *Homage* and *Bye Bye Africa*, *Si Gueriki* is a fairly straightforward documentary. Kpai's voiceover narration and presence behind the camera anchors the film, which, apart from a few showcase scenes, is composed primarily of casual, open-air interviews and some archival imagery. What sets *Si Gueriki* apart from other documentaries is the emphatic specificity of its subjects, particularly Bougnon. Bougnon is no abstract mother figure, standing in for something like authentic culture, self-sacrifice, or the continent of Africa. Witty and cynical, Bougnon is an individual, a critical observer who continually casts doubt on Kpai's project, refusing to take his questions seriously. Yet her grudging participation ultimately changes the course of Kpai's film.

What emerges in their interaction is a film that takes place in precisely the right time: in the attempt to elegize his father, Kpai discovers his mother instead, the historical moments that her life spans, her opinions on gender and changing norms, her own nobility--the status of "queen mother" having been granted to her late in life--and her fierce affection for her co-wife Bona. In diverting his narrative from his patriarchal lineage to his mother's life, Kpai generates a new sense of temporality, and a second story of himself and his family, this time from his mother, a narrative that was only possible precisely because he went away and then returned.

As Idrissou Mora Kpai's first feature-length film, *Si Gueriki* began his career as a documentarian.[270] He has since made two more films, both of which deal with West Africa's place in an increasingly globalized world: its connection to people, ideas, and markets, but also its sudden isolation when economic or political incentives suddenly change. Kpai's second film, *Arlit, Deuxième Paris* (2005), exposes the catastrophic living and working conditions in a Nigerien town built around a uranium mine. With the mine's collapse, Kpai documents how people survive in the wake of environmental and industrial devastation. In *Indochine: sur les traces d'une mère/Indochina, Traces of a Mother* (2011), Kpai tells the story of the children born from the union of Vietnamese mothers and the West African soldiers who enlisted in (or more often, were conscripted into) the First Indochina War (1946-54). While the children were forcibly "repatriated" back to Africa, their mothers were denied passage. Like *Si Gueriki*, *Indochina* brings new specificity and a global vision to the trope of the return, acknowledging that for some Africans, the longed-for *pays natal* may be in Asia.

Si Gueriki begins inauspiciously, with Kpai arriving home only to be greeted by a heavy downpour the moment he pulls out his camera. Kpai sets up his story by talking about his

[270] Idrissou Mora Kpai's professional website suggests that he is branching out into feature film, though at the time of writing, these projects are still in progress.

father's noble lineage in the Wassangari, showing old photographs of his father elegantly dressed and on horseback, but the images contrast sharply with what we see on site. The compound where Kpai films is empty, in use only when his mother is working. In the juxtaposition between the images Kpai talks about and the setting in which he talks about them, the camera captures a sense of belatedness. Kpai seems to have returned to a place he does not know and which no longer knows him, the only man left in a woman's world.

Kpai expects to interview his mother about his father, since she "knew him best," but Kpai gets little information out of his mother. Bougnon refuses to stop her daily chores to give her son her full attention, preferring to treat him as a nuisance, or worse, a fool. In his role as a filmmaker, Kpai asks basic questions about local customs, presumably of interest to his viewer rather than himself, but Bougnon does little to hide her exasperation with his disingenuousness. Kpai's camera focuses intently on the faces and reactions of his subjects as they look at him, allowing us to intercept the expression of Kpai's subjects, not his. In the long takes that Kpai allows us to see their unfolding reactions, he registers his mother's amusement, skepticism, and scorn. Rather than suppress the disjuncture between his personal and professional personas, Kpai's documentary style underscores it. The distance that has grown between him and his mother, the new perspective Kpai assumes as professional filmmaker that allows him to see his family and their customs from an outsider's perspective, both these dynamics register in his mother's expression.

Though her initial disapproval is expressed in bearing rather than in words, Bougnon does not hesitate to directly question of her son's ability to represent their family and community. Kpai's mother reminds him that he has not been back home for very long, that his life and career are elsewhere. When Kpai approaches Bougnon and asks about her isolation from

his other brothers, suggesting that they should come visit like he is, his mother reminds Kpai that their current meeting has another purpose. "It doesn't work that way. You're here for your work. Here, everyone has their own concerns." Bougnon points out that Kpai is only in the women's quarters for an express purpose, his film. Were he finding his own place within the community as a permanent resident, she suggests, he would not be there: "When you're done, you'll leave," she explains. "What if I decided to stay?" Kpai counters, to which his mother responds, "Then you wouldn't be *here* [visiting me]!" Kpai's mother suggests that the subject of Kpai's film is paradoxical: Kpai's interest in women's perspectives stems from his position as an outsider, an expatriate filmmaker, and that the very act of trying to capture her feelings, memories, and behaviors represents a profound disturbance to the environment he is trying to represent. Unlike Camara Laye, who is able to suppress the difference between a naive authenticity and a detached authorial by creating two versions of himself, Kpai shows his mother heightening the contradictions between these two personas, undermining his claims to authenticity and authority.

Yet there is another reason for Bougnon's reticence. When she opens up about Kpai's father, the man she describes is not the noble warrior Kpai remembers proudly, but a miserly patriarch, whose relationship to the women of the household was cold and detached. Realizing that the entire premise of consulting his mother about his father's nobility made no sense from the outset, Kpai allows his mother's revelation to change the course of his film, pivoting to the changes that the women of his family have seen over the course of their lifetimes in Beroubouay. Kpai interviews women of different generations--his mother's co-wife Bona, his sister Adama, and Adama's daughter, Adisa. He begins to explore the relationships between men and women or lack thereof, the institution of marriage and the relatively recent phenomenon of divorce, women's formal education, and public roles that certain women have always been able to hold in

Wassangari society, namely his mother's recent appointment to the position of queen mother. Kpai shows the evolution of a patriarchal society, the flexibility within its traditions as they have developed, particularly the changing norms around gender segregation, a fact demonstrated in part by his own presence and gradual acceptance by his female relatives.

Though he has refocused the film on the women around him, particularly his mother, *Si Gueriki* remains a melancholy film, a reflection on selfhood, exile, and the eventuality of death. The distance that Kpai has crossed in order to make this film, both to receive his training abroad and to return, represents an emotional distance, a deferral of intimacy with his family, a distance that is visible even now that Kpai is in the same room. Kpai is not the only one who feels this distance. His sister Adama was raised by relatives away from her village, as is the norm for the Wassangari, and we are led to wonder if the friction between Bougnon and Adama, who resents the circumstances of her upbringing, can partly be traced to this custom. Bougnon, for her part, defends the practice, arguing that one must accept separation as a part of life, as a part of accepting the inevitability of growth and change: "Didn't we recognize you [when you came back]?" Kpai answers in the affirmative, but he suggests that it was not an authentic recognition, that she didn't understand "who I really was." Bougnon rejects the notion that distance can be staved off, that an authentic familial bond can be conserved, if only because of the certainty of death: "That's how it is. If we had showed you affection, with the way you went off, we'd have fallen ill, and you would have too. But you came back and we recognized you. We prepare for death. That's why we don't fear separation." Bougnon suggests that separation is an essential part of the self-recognition, not its negation. Even as Kpai pursues a new intimacy with his mother and other female family members, his mother reminds him that his departure and return is a part of that bond, one which prefigures a more permanent separation.

Yet for the elderly Bougnon, who has not only outlived her husband but also many of the customs of the world into which she was born, the center of her universe remains at home with her beloved co-wife Bona. Kpai is surprised to find such a strong bond between Bougnon and Bona, who might have been rivals for his father's affection and resources, but they tell him that it was their solidarity, complicity, and love for each other that helped them cope with Kpai's father's demands. Bougnon's unlikely friendship with Bona is the only thing that seems to soften her sharp edges, that makes her almost tender, and their connection is so strong that Bougnon refuses to live in her royal quarters at Nikki where she would be separated from Bona. Instead, the royal cortege comes to pick her up when it is time for her to participate in events. In speaking of her connection to Bona, Bougnon mourns her in advance: "I'm still here because Bona is still here.... With Bona and I, only death will part us." Through their reliance on each other, their combined strategies for dealing with a difficult life with Kpai's father, Bougnon and Bona cannot live without each other, though they know they will eventually lose each other in death. Though both Kpai's professionalism and Bougnon's royalty necessitate intermittent separation, Bougnon has managed to make the system adapt to her own personal ties. Thus, while Kpai's father taught him to exercise his privilege as a male to stand apart, to go abroad, to exercise his mobility, it is his mother, a woman who is fetched by her retinue in her own humble courtyard, who teaches him that it is also an act of strength to refuse to be moved, to keep one's ties, and to make the powerful come to you.

In rededicating his film to his mother, Kpai transforms what might have been a celebration of patriarchy, lineage, and origins into an open-ended exploration of this feminine bond as it has adapted to changing times and new challenges. When Kpai strains his mother's patience by asking about his father's burial, it is Bona who steps in to calm her and answer

Kpai's question. In the end, the dual portrait of the postcolonial author we have come to expect becomes a dual portrait of two women who cannot live without each other, two mothers that work together to make *Si Gueriki*.[271] Indeed, by the end of the film, Kpai's authorial role is significantly reduced. If the film begins with his long introductory voiceovers, describing his return home and his memories of his father, in the end, his voice is less a representation of authorial control than simply a registry of Kpai's continual revisions to his thesis in light of his female subjects. The cooperative effort that evolves out of Kpai's attempt to engage his mothers in his film, a collaboration that has to be built across gender and generational lines, ultimately showcases the power of his mothers' friendship: pliable enough to accomodate a new world with new ideas, just as it was strong enough to outlast the patriarchal figures that have come and gone over the course of their lives.

* * *

In this chapter, I have argued that *Homage*, *Bye Bye Africa*, and *Si Gueriki* return to the question of African identity and selfhood that dominated the first few decades of African literary production. In doing so, they reframe and recontextualize the trope of the return in order to challenge the authenticating narratives of the self on which African authorship has historically been predicated. Though these films are autobiographical, they spend little time talking about their authors. Like a mobius-strip, any apparent "inward" internal self-reflection is also always an "outward" exploration of the intertextual construction of the self, and the construction of the self always parallels the construction of the film.

By casting the autobiographical subject as a "second self," these films articulate the anxiety that authorship paradoxically represents the loss of autonomy, a potential betrayal of the

[271] Kenneth Harrow treats the twinning of women in *Si Gueriki* in greater detail. "Trashy Women, Fallen Man: Fanta Nacro's "Puk Nini" and *La Nuit de la Vérité*," *Trash: African Cinema From Below* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 126-169.

self and one's community. Yet these filmmakers' response to this fear is not an insistence on mastery over themselves and their narratives. Refusing the opposition between the individual and the collective upon which filmmakers like Sembene rejected the personal narrative, Teno, Haroun, and Kpai embrace the textual construction of the self as a collective act, soliciting and acknowledging cooperative authorship. But the second self is also incantatory, exorcistic, a means of exhausting the postcolonial scripts of selfhood through repetition and reiteration, so that the construction of the self, however belated, is always in a new and evolving relationship to what follows from it.

Though these filmmakers apply themselves to fine-grained narratives of grief, family, and the self, they do not allow urgent material and political concerns to recede from view. We might even see these films as an attempt to broaden the scope of francophone African film. Gesturing toward the vast array of cultural and literary texts that structure the way in which African authorship is authorized and understood, these films argue that earlier discussions of identity failed to consider the specifics of another kind of emerging identity: that of the African writer, artist, and filmmaker. They suggest that the initial conditions of African authorship are not so far behind us, that by understanding their enduring structures we retain the possibility of authorship in the present tense.

Chapter Four

Morbid Symptoms: Revolution and the Arts of Dying in Contemporary African Cinema

A pattern has emerged from francophone African cinema of the last fifteen years. The young men and women who populate these films are planning their funerals rather than their futures: making guest lists for their wakes, picking out coffins, and arranging for corpse washers. Preparation for death is not an unfamiliar trope in African literature. Classics like Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Adventure ambiguë/Ambiguous Adventure* (1961) and Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975) emphasized that the living must be ready to meet death with resolve. But readiness for death was a virtue modeled by elders; in Soyinka's play, it is a shock when this order is overturned. Now the young are expected to perform this function. Surreal as these images of youth and death may appear, they reflect a real crisis on the horizon, one to which youth are particularly attuned as they try to make their place in the world. In their lives, death is a fixture, a shadowy but ordinary presence that threatens to reveal itself in desperate cases of scarcity, migration, repression, and violence. For these characters, confronting death means confronting the reality of their social and political circumstances and coming to terms with their grim prospects for the future.

A filmmaking tradition associated with political and social critique, francophone African cinema has had to reckon with its diminished capacity to make demands on the future. As in much of the world, revolutionary politics in Africa have been in retreat over the last fifty years, and the utopian dream of the African nation-state has too often ceded to the realities of autocratic rule. If the first generation of African filmmakers was buoyed by metaphors of national rebirth during the post-independence era, filmmakers today are diagnosing the morbid symptoms--to

borrow Gramsci's expression--of the contemporary political climate. Yet the films discussed in the follow chapter, Flora Gomes' *Nha Fala/My Voice* (2002), Jean-Pierre Bekolo's *Les Saignantes/The Bloodletters* (2005), and Alain Gomis' *Tey/Today* (2012), address the fatalism of the moment without accepting it. Adopting a gallows humor, playful irony, stylized and stylish aesthetics, these films greet a dying order with the arts of dying. Like the *ars moriendi* that assisted the moribund with their last rites in the wake of the Black Death, the arts of dying have the power to dull our fear of the unknown, to show us a vision of a world beyond our own. If the arts of the thirteenth century urged repentance in one's final moments, these arts exhort us to act, to see ourselves as agents of change before it is too late.

Though the arts of dying are spearheaded by youth, their elders also play a crucial role. In their capacity as social ritual, the arts of dying precipitate collective deliberation, coordinated action, and confrontation, particularly between generations. The encounter between youth and their elders, whether supportive or adversarial, broadens the temporal scope of the narrative and opens up possibilities for radical change. Yet equally important to this process is the aesthetic dimension of the arts of dying, not only art, music, or cinema, but the everyday sensations of sound, taste, and touch. What does the possibility of imminent change *feel* like? How can art reflect or even induce the sensation--physical, psychological, spiritual--of being on a threshold of new possibility? Though the answers to these questions may be a distant memory, these films suggest that the arts of dying can bring them back to the forefront of our minds, so that a young generation can feel the sensation of revolution anew.

In exploring the distinctly human dynamic of transformative change, these films probe feelings of rage, desperation, determination, but also, unexpectedly, sensations of pleasure, of dreaming, and desiring. In his book *Sortir de la grande nuit*, Achille Mbembe reminds us that the

anti-colonial movement would not have been possible without "the conscious production, on the part of the insurgents, of a strange power-- sublime illusion or the power of fantasy?--, of an energetic and incendiary force, a structure of affect composed of calculating reason and anger, of faith and opportunism, of desire and exultation, of messianism, even madness."[272] These films make a case for the political utility of emotion and sensation, but most particularly for pleasure, an emphasis that sets these films apart from those that have defined francophone African film in the past. The art of producing pleasure in oneself and others comes to signify a triumph over many different forms of absolute power, even that of death. Using sensorial, erotic, and gastronomic themes, popular music soundtracks, internationally recognized actors, and popular genres, these films suggest that an aesthetics of crisis need not be austere.

By making everyday sensation, emotion, and pleasure central to their notion of revolutionary consciousness, these films redefine cinema's role in the struggle to bring about radical change. They propose an aesthetics for an age of dead(end) politics, one in which the most basic elements of human experience become the basis for building an alternative way of life. As we will see in the following section, the notion that pleasure and politics might be productively related met steady resistance in the earliest years of francophone African filmmaking, but a new generation of filmmakers are using genre films--Westerns, comedies, science fiction films, fantasies--as a vehicle for politics. These filmmakers are rethinking the aesthetics of revolution, both by looking outward to African film's presence on an international scene, but also inward, at the history of francophone African film, particularly the styles of

[272] "Il faut comprendre que le soulèvement (notamment armé) organisé pour mettre un terme à la domination coloniale et à la loi de la race qui en était le pilier n'eût guère été possible sans la production consciente, de la part des insurgés, d'un pouvoir étrange - sublime illusion ou pou voir du songe ? -, d'une puissance énergétique et incendiaire, d'une structure d'affects faite de raison calculatrice et de colère, de foi et d'opportunisme, de désirs et d'exaltation, de messianisme, voire de folie." Achille Mbembe, *Sortir de la grande nuit: essai sur l'Afrique décolonisée* (Paris: Editions La Découverte, 2010): 18.

filmmakers like Djibril Diop Mambety. Pushing the boundaries of popular genre, Gomes, Bekolo, and Gomis bring us into the elaborate death worlds of political crisis so that we might find a way out of the morbid political climate in which we live.

* * *

Popular Genre and Political Consciousness

Though francophone African genre movies are increasingly common today, they were exceptionally rare for the first few decades of African filmmaking. Filmmakers of the first generation, represented most visibly by Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembene, tasked themselves with addressing the social and political concerns of the postcolonial nation in the immediate aftermath of independence. In July 1969, the powerful filmmakers' association, La Fédération Panafricaine des Cinéastes (FEPACI) was formed. Committed to the project of African nationalism, the FEPACI insisted that African cinema would be a political instrument rather than a form of entertainment.[273] Genre films, associated with commercial cinema and Hollywood in particular, relied heavily on racial stereotypes and orientalist tropes. The FEPACI urged filmmakers to eschew genre and entertainment cinema, and instead to use documentary, docufiction, and didactic fictional forms that would nurture a political consciousness in their new postcolonial nations.

Yet in order to realize this idea of African cinema by and for the nation, the FEPACI would need to decolonize the industry itself. The FEPACI envisioned a series of national hubs within a regional film industry that would be capable of challenging the French monopoly on

[273] In his book *Postnationalist African Cinemas*, Alexie Tcheuyap writes that FEPACI defined African cinema "as precisely not a form of entertainment. Cinema was meant not for pleasure, but for (political) instruction. In keeping with these principles, African cinema, like African literature, could only be a cinema of contestation." Tcheuyap, *Postnationalist African Cinemas* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 7.

film production and distribution in the region.[274] While Guinea, Upper Volta, and Mali nationalized large portions of their film industries, other countries like Senegal, Ivory Coast, and Niger were able to do little more than offer filmmakers government subsidies.[275] Manthia Diawara has argued that francophone African countries failed in their attempt to create film industries from whole cloth because they were either largely unwilling to make the necessary interventions in the private sector, or were unable to maintain the massive infrastructural and educational investments required for domestic film production.[276] Forced to rely on French equipment, facilities, and technicians, francophone African filmmaking struggled to escape the chronic structural dependency that had been put into place under colonialism.

FEPACI's failed attempt to build a homegrown political cinema had the unfortunate consequence of estranging francophone African cinema from popular culture. Through a confluence of infrastructural gaps and perverse market incentives, most francophone African cinema was and continues to be funded, produced, and screened abroad. As a result, cinema production and consumption occupy almost entirely separate spheres.[277] Unlike Nollywood, the billion-dollar Nigerian video-film industry, which bypassed the need for Western funding through a combination of private financing and cheap digital technology, francophone African film is exported to niche audiences-- festival circuits, art and cultural centers, American and European universities--while local audiences rarely have access to anything but European, American, Hindi, and other international genre cinema.

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[274] Manthia Diawara, *African Cinema: Politics and Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 35.
[275] Ibid. 57.
[276] Diawara contends that few countries invested in training technicians or post-production facilities, and when they did, budgetary concerns and technological incompatibilities meant that facilities often went unused or unmaintained. Ibid., 67-83.
[277] According to Diawara, filmmakers who accepted the financial backing of French Cooperation, the largest producer of francophone African film during the first three decades of production, signed away noncommercial distribution rights for five years, stipulations that made it almost impossible to distribute commercially. Ibid, 33.

But this practice is beginning to change. Increasingly, francophone African filmmakers are working to bridge the gap between their films and African audiences. Jean-Pierre Bekolo's 1992 film *Quartier Mozart* was a watershed moment in this respect, a sign that African filmmakers could make room in their films for popular genre, music, fashion, and youth culture. By the early 2000s, stylish genre films like *Madame Brouette* (Moussa Sene Absa, 2002) and *Karmen Geï* (Joseph Gaï Ramaka, 2001) followed suit, aiming for a more general audience. As Ramaka said in 2009, "I am not a filmmaker *engagé*. I am an ordinary citizen *engagé*. I want the rank-and-file, the policeman, filmmaker, administrator, and judge to be engaged as self-conscious citizens. What interests me is the commitment of the citizen, not the militant filmmaker or his organization."[278] For filmmakers like Ramaka, FEPACI's aesthetic dogma was suffocating political cinema, and only the fresh air of popular culture would bring it back to life.

Though they often criticized FEPACI-era dogma, these filmmakers were cognizant of alternative models in African film history. Sembene and his aesthetic had been ascendant for decades, but filmmakers like Djibril Diop Mambety and Med Hondo had incorporated popular culture and popular genre into their films as early as the 1970s, exploring avant-garde, hybridizing approaches to Westerns, musicals, crime films, and comedies, and infusing these genres with political content. In the 1980s, comedies by Henri duParc (*Bal poussière/Dancing in the Dust*, 1987) and Mweze Ngangura and Benoît Lamy (*La Vie est belle/Life is Beautiful*, 1987) were true genre films, appealing directly to a broad commercial audience. But it was Mambety who, having returned to filmmaking in 1990s after long hiatus, became the muse for a young

[278] Joseph Gaï Ramaka, "I Am Not a Filmmaker *Engagé*. I Am an Ordinary Citizen *Engagé*," interview by Michael T. Martin, *Research in African Literatures* 40, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 211.

generation of filmmakers seeking to construct a new genealogy for African filmmaking in the present.[279]

Captured by Jean-Pierre Bekolo in one of his early documentary short films, *Grandmother's Grammar*, Mambety characterizes the African genre film as a double transgression, breaking the unwritten rules of the Hollywood genre film as well as the African oral tale.[280] With regard to the former, Mambety tells an anecdote about his early love of genre films, and his childhood obsession with Fred Zinneman's *High Noon* (1952), a film which he says has "held no secrets for me since the age of 15, shot by shot." Yet even in his admiration, Mambety questions why he couldn't make these stories, so global in their influence, part of his world: "Why couldn't Gary Cooper be one of my friends here?" he asks. "What couldn't the train whistle just next to my house?" Mambety lingers on a child's sense of pleasure and his bold naivete, the imaginative audacity he must wield to bring Gary Cooper and Grace Kelly to Senegal. Mambety suggests that despite the global influence of Hollywood films, they resist their own translation. To bring African genre films into existence, one must be like the dreaming, desiring child, someone who breaks all the rules in the name of play.

But Mambety also acknowledges that for some, inviting popular genre into African film signifies a betrayal of established notions of traditional African storytelling. In response, Mambety theorizes that defiance and deference to tradition are not necessarily opposed. In another vignette, parable-like in Mambety's telling, he invokes the figure of the grandmother-storyteller, so revered as a symbol of traditional heritage that it is shocking when he suggests that her stories can be boring. When he accuses her of repeating herself, this grandmother replies that

[279] Bekolo and Gomis both cite Mambety as an important influence.
[280] *Grandmother's Grammar/La Grammaire de grand-mère*, directed by Jean-Pierre Bekolo (1996). https://vimeo.com/167252772

his quarrel is not with "*grand-mère*" but "*grammaire*," the rules of storytelling. Cinema, for Mambety, has at once a grandmother (*une grand-mère*), a rich source of stories, and a grammar (*une grammaire*), their prescribed modes of expression. But Mambety's parable insists that *grandmère* and *grammaire* are two very separate things; *grand-mère* does not dictate *grammaire*. The rules are his to break, *grand-mère* explains, "because this whole world belongs to you, my son." Bringing a clichéd figure back to life, Mambety represents the grandmother not as one who resists change, but one who guides him toward aesthetic independence, because only "re-invent[ion]... ensures her perpetuity." He credits the grandmother as both the source of tradition *and* of autonomy, suggesting that genuine intergenerational dialogue, like that taking place between Bekolo and Mambety through the film itself, is more productive than grappling with the desires of ghosts, our projections of the past. The formulas that constrain us anticipate change, Mambety asserts. "If it is possible to say "once upon a time (*il était une fois*), we must also be able to say, "once upon a future (*demain il sera une fois.*)"

For the filmmakers discussed in this chapter, the Hollywood genre film is useful for its popular appeal and commercial potential, but also for the rules and conventions that inhere within it--its grammar, in Mambety's terms--and the transgressive power unleashed when these rules are broken. The generic conventions that keep Gary Cooper in the Old West are grains that seed an entire reality; they govern the nature of its populations, its landscapes, and everything from societal norms to natural law. In the films discussed in this chapter, this logic is a dystopian logic. Death is woven into fabric of the universe; the sordidness of the status quo is as unalterable as the laws of physics. What each of these films does with the powerfully generative force of genre is to show it bend and finally break under the weight of social action. As generic conventions are abandoned, the world of the film experiences a tectonic shift in every dimension.

The laws of space and time become tractable, and solid social realities of the world melt away. As we will see, by challenging their plausibility from within, these films reclaim and remake the genre film beyond its commercial and imperial past, trying to retrieve the contingency of a larger political future.

* * *

Artistic Expression and the Burden of History in Flora Gomes' *Nha Fala*

Flora Gomes' *Nha Fala/My Voice* (2002) is a musical that takes place in a small island community (Cape Verde, the filming location, is implied but not named) as a generation born after independence comes of age. Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau did not win independence from Portugal until 1974, and even if the young people of this film cannot remember the armed struggle, they are reminded of it in ways both big and small, from the bust of Amilcar Cabral that still lacks a permanent installation site, to the missing fathers, brothers, and grandfathers whose absences are quietly remarked throughout the film.

Nha Fala asks what it means to set a musical at the beginning of a new century in the midst of this unsettled history. Gomes stages an intergenerational conflict over terms, between an older generation that fears fate will deal them a heartbreaking denouement, and a younger one that refuses to submit to the logic of tragedy. Though there is much in *Nha Fala* to suggest an allegory of political participation, the film insists on aesthetics as the strongest weapon against social and political crisis. The importance of one's "voice" is not simply a metaphor for political subjectivity, but quite literally evokes embodied expression. In this section, I argue that *Nha Fala* can be seen as a struggle among its characters to understand the genre of the narrative they occupy, ultimately settling on the musical comedy as they give themselves over to its properties of expression, song and dance, and unrelenting optimism.

Of all the filmmakers discussed in this chapter, Gomes is the closest to the first generation of African filmmakers, not only in age but also in his sense of responsibility to a national project. Born in Cadique, Guinea Bissau in 1949, Gomes studied film at the Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematograficos (ICAIC), then served as an apprentice in newsreel production for two years under Paul Soumanou Vieyra, the Beninese (though Dakar-based) filmmaker and critic.[281] In addition to Vieyra's influence, Gomes acknowledges a strong debt to Sembene. As we will see, Gomes places one of Sembene's most famous plot devices at *Nha Fala*'s core, and though it is made to serve quite a different purpose, it sets the film in dialogue with the Sembenian canon.

Gomes started his career as a documentary filmmaker. His *O Regresso de Cabral*/*The Return of Cabral* (1976) and *Anos de oca luta*/*Years of Struggle* (1978) both focused on the war for independence and its aftermath. For his first feature film, *Mortu Nega/Those Whom Death Refused* (1988), which follows the married couple Dimeinga and Sako through the end of the war and the early years of independence, Gomes petitioned the Bissau-Guinean government to fund the film. It eventually did, and the making of the film has been described by Gomes as a vast popular effort, with veterans of the war offering advice and support and actors working as a service rather than for pay. *Mortu Nega* continues to be the sole film funded by Guinea Bissau, but Gomes has always been committed to the ideal. Akin Adesokan has characterized Gomes' work as providing "a rich space in which the agenda of a national cinema may coexist with the transnational imaginary integral to global capital."[282] Gomes does not see a serious contradiction between making films for the postcolonial nation and relying on international financing to do so,

[281] Vieyra, along with Jacques Mélo Kane and Mamadou Sarr, is often credited with making one of the first African films, *Afrique sur Seine* (1955).
[282] Akin Adesokan, "Flora Gomes: Filmmaker in Search of a Nation," *Black Camera* 3, no. 1 (2011): 31.

and on a thematic level, *Nha Fala* suggests that this kind of international cooperation can be mutually beneficial.

Gomes has led the transition to genre films with gusto. As early as *Mortu Nega*, Gomes gave romance a place of prominence in his films. The relationship between politics, love, and desire has been a consistent issue in his work, addressed most directly in the film *Udju Azul di Yonta*/*The Blue Eyes of Yonta* (1992), about the attraction between a former liberation fighter and the daughter of one of his old comrades. *Udju Azul di Yonta* also continues to explore the transition from wartime to peacetime as well as the difficulty of building close relationships between the wartime and postwar generations. Gomes' *Po di sangui*/*Tree of Blood* represented a step in a different direction, telling the story of a village threatened by state violence and appropriation of sacred trees. Told as a kind of fable, *Po di sangui* takes both youth and the weight of grief as themes, topics Gomes would continue to explore in *Nha Fala*. *Nha Fala* was to mark Gomes' decisive turn toward genre films, a direction he has since continued with his most recent film *A República di Mininus/Republic of Children* (2012), a science-fiction film starring Danny Glover.

Gomes attempted to make his first musical, *Nha Fala,* as an homage to African musicians. Gomes emphasizes how difficult it was: "I admit that there is something crazy about me. I like to explore new things, even though I know that musicals are very difficult to make."[283] *Nha Fala,* told partly in Portuguese Creole, partly in French, features a large cast which includes Senegalese actor and model Fatou N'Diaye and a score by the famous Cameroonian musician Manu Dibango. But music is more than an attention-grabbing feature of *Nha Fala.* The "voice" to which the title refers is that of the main character, Vita, played by N'Diaye. The film begins

[283] Frieda Ekotto, "Black Skin on Screen is Beautiful: Flora Gomes with Frieda Ekotto," in *Through African Eyes: Dialogues with the Directors*, eds. Mahen Bonetti and Prerana Reddy (New York: African Film Festival, 2003), 45.

on her last day at home before she leaves to study in Paris. As she visits different places in the neighborhood to say her goodbyes, her friends sing to her, each group offering her advice about various matters. Though Vita listens carefully to the songs, often speaking during a dance break or swaying to the beat, she never sings along, giving her little opportunity to respond or give her own opinion. Finally, just before Vita's departure, she receives one last piece of advice from her mother, and we learn why Vita never sings. Her mother reminds her that though she is leaving home, she is still cursed. She, like all the women in her family, suffers from an ancestral taboo: she must not sing or she will die.

By introducing Vita's fatal flaw, Gomes is playing with audience expectations. Viewers of African film may remember the tragic curse from Sembene's *Xala*, arguably the most well-known francophone African film to date, in which El Hadji is cursed with impotence before he can consummate his third marriage. In *Xala*, El Hadji's refusal to take the curse seriously leads to his utter humiliation, suggesting that a similar fate could be in store for Vita. A number of other potential conflicts are foreshadowed early on in *Nha Fala*, including Vita's volatile ex-boyfriend and his get-rich-quick scheme to hold the town's rice supply hostage (another potential reference to *Xala*),[284] and the specter of youth unemployment that awaits Vita if she returns to the island. The opening shot of the film, which shows a group of very young children carrying the funeral bier for their classroom parrot, suggests that this is a place where even the young are inured to death's presence, that death must surely lie in wait for our characters. If *Xala* was a grim commentary on postcolonial modernity and the corruption of the ruling class in independent Senegal, *Nha Fala* initially appears to foreshadow the exploitation of a precarious

[284] Yano's scheme to drive up the price of rice and lure Vita back with his riches nods to El Hadji's theft of the villagers' rice, sold to bankroll his third marriage.

community by the villainous Yano, and Vita's tragic choice between traditional and modern imperatives.

Yet what is so unusual about *Nha Fala* is that the tragedy for which we are being prepared never comes to pass. We are led by red herrings, Macguffins, fragments of our own expectations for an African film, but they serve only to set the real story in motion: Vita's struggle to overcome the barriers to her creative expression. The more substantive conflict then, deals with Vita's mother, whose belief in the curse, passed down from generation to generation, is unwavering. What is troubling about the curse is not that Vita refuses to heed it. The greater problem, we are led to see, is that while she obeys the taboo for her mother's sake, Vita cannot fully participate in the discourse that is taking place around her.

If Vita is unable to find relief from the curse she has inherited, we also see her community trying to shed the burden of a traumatic history. Gomes makes this "lightening" of history's burden quite literal from the very beginning of the film, when a heavy bust of Cabral [Figure 40] flies off the back of a truck. Yano had planned to install it to impress Vita, but when he must hit the gas to pursue her, Cabral becomes a casualty of sex appeal.[285] At home, Vita says goodbye to her grandmother, who talks about the painful days under colonialism and the loss of her son who died in Angola. But she also asks Vita to send her a pink negligee from Paris, explaining that her late husband liked to see her that way, and that she hoped to be buried in it. Youthful concerns predominate, even when it comes to Cabral himself. Abandoned by Yano, one of his workers puts the bust in a baby's pram and wheels him around for the amusement of passersby. No longer a heavy statue lacking a plinth, Cabral is small and nimble, though reliant on human care to make his way in the world. In each case, the solemnity demanded by historical

[285] In another scene, the laborers unpacking the Cabral bust are remarking how beautiful "it" is, but the following shot reveals that they are actually admiring Vita walking by.

trauma is allayed by sensuality and vulnerability, giving the past a chance to become a part of a vibrant and vital present.

Figure 40

In contrast, Vita's leaving for Paris is treated with utmost seriousness. Vita's departure coincides with the wake of her elderly neighbor, whose peaceful death of old age is treated as an opportunity for a revelry, rich food, song, and dance. It is Vita's farewell that is funereal, as it presumed that if she succeeds, she will never return home. When the partygoers implore Vita to deliver letters to their loved ones abroad on their behalf, Vita is burdened with hundreds of letters, many without addresses, bound not just for Paris, but for London, Lisbon, Bordeaux, Rome, Stockholm, and America. For these desperate letter writers, communicating with friends and relatives abroad is like sending letters to the dead. The tragedy, from the perspective of Vita's loved ones, is the separation they all must suffer so the young can make their way in the world. Cut off from each other, old and young alike are condemned to a life virtually indistinguishable from death.

Contrary to what we have been led to expect, when we follow Vita to Paris, we find the city very much alive. In a single, seamless cut, Gomes' camera transports us to Vita's neighborhood in Paris, where people sing and dance and rely on Vita just as we saw in her home.

Rather than death, Vita finds love with a musician named Pierre. Through Pierre, Vita meets people from all over the globe, not just Europeans but Senegalese, Algerians, and Vietnamese. As they sing the song, "Bye Bye 20th Century," a sense of shared history seems to link them all, even the Portuguese, who are represented as low-paid workers in Paris, and though Vita does encounter racism in the form of an elderly Frenchman, he is rendered utterly non-threatening by the music and mise-en-scene. Where Gomes instead draws our attention is the influence that Pierre has on Vita, and the new relationship between creativity, expression, and pleasure that his character inspires in her. After the first night they spend together, Vita goes up to the rooftop of Pierre's apartment to sing for the first time in her life. Upon discovering her vocal talents, Vita decides to collaborate with Pierre, and though he initially suggests she sing something he has already written, Vita insists on improvising new lyrics herself. If previously Vita had to accept things as other people dictated them, now she insists on unmitigated self-expression.

Newly empowered to use her voice, Vita takes control of the narrative. In order to show her mother that the curse has no power and that they can both use their voices without fear, Vita devises an elaborate plan. Now a confident musician, Vita decides to make her "death" a form of art, to strip it of its literal power, shaping it into a symbol of transformation and renewal both for herself and for her neighborhood. To prepare for the event, Vita marshals her many friends--musicians, artists, and craftsmen--both at home and in France, and returns to the island to organize her own wake, a wake without death.

With Vita driving the storyline, the tragic overtones fade and the generic conventions of the musical comedy reign. Vita's approach to the wake is playful and artistic. She buys out the entire supply of coffins in town, all of them colorful fantasy coffins, selecting a butterfly-shaped coffin for herself. Though she begins the wake by lying in the coffin, she asks friends to serve as

her body double so that she can circulate, greeting guests and making last minute arrangements. As the wake spills out from Vita's home onto the streets and finally around a stage set up in the public square, Vita uses a call-and-response chant with the throngs of partygoers to coax her mother into song: "What do you do when something keeps you from moving forward? (Crowd: Dare!) …What do you do when the grass withers and the sun disappears? (Dare!)" Vita's mother joins Vita's song, adding: "When you have no peace in life, when the birds fly away, when the rivers take our children away? (Dare!) …When you fear tearing the book when turning the page? When you hesitate before you act? When you want to make love for the second time? (Dare!)" Through the power of art and storytelling, Vita drives back the dread that held her mother and her community hostage to fear, and helps them to come together to write a narrative of rebirth.

The end of *Nha Fala* invites us to witness the power of unified action, particularly the coordinated energy and dynamism set in motion by art and music. Fittingly, the theme of levity and levitation, first introduced by the flying Cabral bust, returns in the final sequence. We watch Vita in her butterfly coffin carried by many hands, so that she floats above the dancing crowd [Figure 41]. Others join her, holding up coffins shaped like fish, cars, elephants, cats, and boats. Even Cabral's bust is freed from his pram and borne aloft through the crowd. Mysteriously, the bust has grown in size, like a living being. Once small enough to be lifted by one man, Cabral is now massive, but still dances above the crowd. In the very end, Cabral is able to carry himself [Figure 42]. In the final scene, the bust of Cabral vaults up in the air of its own accord onto a plinth at the edge of the beach. Cabral's surreal leap, achieved by running the film footage backward, transforms his weightiness into something easy and pleasurable, like flight.

Figure 41

Figure 42

In *Nha Fala*, Gomes argues that we need not jettison the hardships of the past in order to make their burdens light. Musical comedies are known for their predictable Hollywood endings, but Gomes shows that it still has rules to break. Likewise, there is no mold for the francophone African film. The more we are led by our assumptions --about tradition and modernity, the foreign and the local-- the more *Nha Fala* catches us off-guard. *Nha Fala* calls for freedom of expression in postcolonial art, advocating for a postcolonial aesthetic attuned to human nature and the human body in all its needs and desires. If we place our faith in art, Gomes suggests, it

can teach us to live without fear, to let ourselves be carried away by our dreams into a better future.

* * *

Possession and the Erotic Arts in *Les Saignantes*

Where *Nha Fala* ended by reaffirming a strong mother-daughter bond and its life-giving power, in *Les Saignantes,* the traumatic loss of this bond inspires the macabre but ultimately curative scheme of the protagonists, Majolie and Chouchou. Toward the middle of film, the two best friends run out of gas on a dangerous errand. Stranded on the side of the road, Majolie despairs under the weight of their predicament. Chouchou tries to distract her by talking about their mothers. Majolie laughs at an impersonation of Chouchou's mother, but the mention of her own mother makes her cry. Majolie opens up about her mother's death at only twenty-three years old, and remembers being a child at her wake. "Since that day, I've been imagining my own wake," Majolie tells Chouchou. "And how do you picture it?" Chouchou asks. Majolie is cheered by this thought, as she imagines a grand party: "With many people, like a star, like a *saignante*!"

Majolie and Chouchou are *saignantes*, women who perform sexual favors in exchange for lucrative government contracts. When one of Majolie's elderly business partners dies in the act, Majolie and Chouchou begin to see his death as an opportunity rather than a misfortune. They decide to weaponize Majolie's vision, channeling their love of glamour and their abundance of grief into a performance of mourning that will (with some maternal assistance) ensnare powerful agents of the state's predation. At the same time, this emotional moment of sincere vulnerability between two *femmes fatales* represents an unconventional variation on film noir, one that epitomizes Jean-Pierre Bekolo's inventive approach to filmmaking. Bekolo is

known for criticizing the hagiographies and performances of mourning that prop up the patriarchal figures of African politics and African film alike, and with *Les Saignantes*, Bekolo suggests that power's reliance on elegy may be its Achilles heel. Using the power of art to access the depths of desire, the heroines of *Les Saignantes* suggest that art can be a dangerous, retributive force against those who abuse their power.

Bekolo's films vary widely, reflecting his regard for originality, but they all share a strong sense of the current moment, exploring youth subcultures, gender politics, and changing sexual mores. Born in 1966 in Yaounde, Cameroon, Bekolo trained in film editing for television at the Institut National de l'Audiovisuel in Paris and directed a number of short films and music videos in the late 1980s. For his first full-length film, *Quartier Mozart* (1992), Bekolo made a comedy, centered on a neighborhood thrown into confusion after a local witch begins transforming girls into men and making men's genitals disappear. *Aristotle's Plot* (1995), his second film, commissioned by the British Film Institute for its centennial of cinema series, is part essay film, part genre mashup that pokes fun at the conventions of Hollywood popular films and their African fans while at the same time calling for more creativity in African film. In addition to the previously-mentioned documentary about Mambety, *Grandmother's Grammar,* and the short, science fiction-inflected *Une Africaine dans l'espace/An African Woman in Space* (2007), Bekolo's most recent films include a four-hour documentary about the Congolese thinker and writer V.Y. Mudimbe (*Les mots et les choses*, 2015) and *Le Président* (2013), a mockumentary-style drama which stages a confrontation between an aging autocrat (one which bears some similarities to Cameroonian president Paul Biya) and his youthful opposition.

Bekolo's experimentation with genre represents his own attempt to diversify francophone African cinema. Most African film, according to Bekolo, fuels a market for misery, and African

filmmakers work within a system that rewards stories of abjection: "[T]ragedy is pushed on Africa. This is how the pattern works: if I or anyone else makes a film about something bad in Africa today we will be supported and we will recuperate our investment...for me, that is actually what is keeping us down in a way. I believe that Africa is everything but tragic."[286] Bekolo considers genre a tool for thinking through contemporary local issues, "to raise questions about what concerns us, and it doesn't really matter whether it's science fiction, or a horror film, or a detective story. It's really about our society and where it's going. One has to be critical about that society while using those genres, so it doesn't mean that we can't make a film in those genres."[287] At the same time, in order to reflect local realities, genre's preconceived formulae have to be translated. As we will see in *Les Saignantes*, Bekolo uses the genre format while drawing on the history of an all-female secret society abolished by German missionaries in the 19th century, collapsing the distance between the film's contemporary urban storyline and older cultural traditions.[288]

Perhaps best described as a cyberpunk film in the tradition of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), *Les Saignantes* amplifies cyberpunk's hybrid of sci-fi, noir, and crime fiction with elements of horror and martial arts. The film takes place in Yaounde in 2025, a modest look into the future, just twenty years after the film was released. "Not much has changed," a narrator admits in voiceover, though we might infer that, if *Les Saignantes* is contiguous with our world, Majolie, Chouchou, and their peers represent a vision of adulthood for the children of 2005. In keeping with the dystopian mood, the entire film takes place in darkness, and though we seem to experience more than one day passing, the light and even the fullness of the moon never change.

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[286] Ibid., 220.
[287] Ibid., 4.
[288] Naminata Diabate, "Reimagining West African Women's Sexuality: Bekolo's *Les Saignantes* and the Mevoungou," in *Development, Modernism, and Modernity in Africa*, ed. Augustine Agwuele (New York: Routledge, 2012), 167.

During this long night, the smoke-filled street is lit with neon and trash fires. Interiors have a rich, jewel-toned aesthetic, and the elements of ritual we encounter there--strange cocktails, reflective fabrics, writhing grub-- are lit like precious stones. Sleek and nocturnal, the soundtrack serves to highlight the primary visuals of the film: the bodies of our protagonists moving sensually in the dim light.

If music and sexuality were critical components of agency in Gomes' *Nha Fala,* Bekolo asks us to consider the erotic. We are nowhere more directly implicated in the erotic gaze than in the first sequence, in which we glimpse the balletic routine Majolie performs for her business partners [Figure 43]. Majolie first appears as a pair of bare legs at the edge of a bed, standing over an elderly man. This man, who we later learn is the powerful Secretary General of the Civil Cabinet (SGCC), is the picture of weakness, lying supine in his underwear, serving only to highlight Majolie's comparative strength. When she leaps in the air we expect her to fall back on the waiting man, but she defies gravity, hanging in mid-air, controlling and prolonging her descent. Though the next shot reveals the ceiling harness that supports her, Majolie's airborne choreography foreshadows the mystical power she will learn to wield. Majolie, nearly nude, appears as an object of this man's sexual gratification as well as the spectator's gaze, and yet her performance is one of domination and violence. While Majolie's roughness with her partner is at this moment a form of play, when he accidentally dies in the process, we begin to understand the real power and danger Majolie wields through her erotic art.

Figure 43

The sexual power unleashed in *Les Saignantes* has its roots in traditional power structures among the Beti in Cameroon. "The Mevoungou," the narrator tells us, "had cast its spell on us. We had to take it and use it." The Mevoungou, a ritual once practiced by a secret society of Beti women, derived its power of conflict and crisis resolution from female sexuality. Naminata Diabate has detailed the ritual practice and historical role of the Mevoungou as follows:

> According to Beti cosmogony, the Mevoungou is built around the cult of the evu, a gland embodying good and evil that is located in women's uteruses. When activated, the gland is capable of giving life or taking it. The location of the gland explains why the power of the Mevoungou is predicated upon the clitoris, considered the exterior physical site of this gland....Although the society is forbidden to men, the entire community of men and women reap its benefits. Its rituals, performed at the request of men and women, aim to settle cases of thievery or witchcraft, for personal crises and prosperity and during moments of drought and calamity in the community.[289]

In the film, Mevoungou is interpreted as a kind of invisible presence that takes hold of Majolie and Chouchou in the course of their encounter with the SSGC. Using sisterhood and sexual pleasure as forces of societal healing, Mevoungou lends Majolie and Chouchou supernatural strength and protection and eventually instructs them to deploy their erotic arts against larger social evils.

[289] Diabate, "Reimagining West African Women's Sexuality," 172.

But *Les Saignantes* takes the historical existence of the Mevoungou only as a starting point. Bekolo does not simply graft the social structures of an earlier time onto his futuristic setting. Instead, he reimagines the notion of Mevoungou in a way that reflects contemporary relationships between women of different generations. Chouchou behaves as we might expect a typical teenager to behave. Sullen in her mother's presence, Chouchou rankles at her questions and answers her with insolence. For this reason, Chouchou's mother and the other mysterious older women in the ritual society operate mostly out of sight of Majolie and Chouchou [Figure 5]. Working by technology and telepathy, the older women secretly aid Chouchou and Majolie as they undergo ritual purifications, trance, and ultimately total possession by Mevoungou. Only once do the older women force the younger ones to submit to ingestion of various ritual concoctions. However, as Diabate points out, there is one central ritual which Chouchou and Majolie refuse to undergo--the inspection and stimulation of the clitoris by the older women.[290] Though the power of the older women is crucial to them, Majolie and Chouchou refuse the act of sexual submission to their elders as the historical ritual would have required. The young women insist on retaining some individual control over their mission and their own sexual pleasure.

[290] Diabate treats this scene and Bekolo's choice to omit certain aspects of the Mevoungou in much greater depth. Ibid., 176-177.

Figure 44

Hand in hand with *Les Saignantes*' celebration of feminine sexuality is its challenge to male sexual dominance, a metaphoric castration that the saignantes carry out with relish. Passing through states of pity, disdain, and anger toward the dead SGCC, the SGCC is beaten, wrapped in plastic, dragged down the stairs, and dumped at the neighborhood butcher. When Chouchou hesitates to submit the SGCC to the butcher's rusty machete, Majolie reminds her of the unjust power he wielded when he was alive: "He wasn't rusty, lying on top of me?!" When the butcher, initially a terrifying figure, realizes whose body he is desecrating, he is reduced to uncontrollable sobs. Majolie and Chouchou are left with only the SGCC's head, which Chouchou brandishes like Perseus to scare off a group of leering men. Other women seem possessed by the same retaliatory force, and come to Majolie and Chouchou's aid. While trying to follow the trail of the two women, a policeman named Inspector Rokko has his gun stolen by a woman in the street. While pursuing them into Chouchou's house, his gun is again lifted out of his holster under the influence of Mevoungou. The more men they symbolically castrate and disarm, the more Mevoungou grants them extraordinary powers, until they have caught their biggest prey, the Ministre d'État.

Assured of Mevoungou's presence and inspired by Majolie's memory of her mother's

wake, Majolie and Chouchou identify the "D.G.P.," or the "*Deuil de grande personnalité*" (V.I.W.: "Very Important Wake") as the perfect site to exploit the vanities of the state. Having arranged for the SGCC's head to be put on an unclaimed body [Figure 45], the saignantes have laid their first trap for the glamorous mourners, who unwittingly heap honors on an anonymous convict. In a coordinated performance of praise, grief, and submission to male authority, Majolie and Chouchou switch out the bait, offering their own bodies as they work themselves into the minister's car on the pretext of needing his consolation and protection. What the minister does not realize is that with Mevoungou, the women's bodies are weapons. Though the minister has his own occult powers that he turns against Majolie and Chouchou, in the end, under the full moon and the influence of Mevoungou, the two women defeat him and unburden themselves of Mevoungou in a moment of violent orgasmic release.

Figure 45

The final shot of the film returns us to the question of African film and its ability to intervene in the world. Text appears on an outdoor movie screen, asking us, "How can you watch a film like this and do nothing after? [Figure 46]" It is the last in a series of intertitles that have intermittently flashed on the screen during the film, including: "How can you make a science fiction film in a country that has no future," "How can you make a horror film in a place where

death is a party," "How can you make a crime film in a country where investigation is forbidden," and "How can you film a love story where love is impossible?" In these metatextual interludes, Bekolo uses the lens of popular genre to turn our attention back to reality, to the absurd logic of everyday life under a despotic regime. Yet, to take Bekolo seriously, what lessons are we expected to draw from *Les Saignantes*? Is there a practical model for resistance in this story of supernatural and sexual warfare? Perhaps Bekolo's constant gestures outside the film invite us to consider Majolie and Chouchou's abilities as an allegory for the power of storytelling itself. If our heroines are possessed, channelling powers well beyond their conscious understanding, perhaps storytelling empowers us in subtle and mysterious ways that we may not even understand until they are compelling us forward, toward greater endeavors and aspirations.

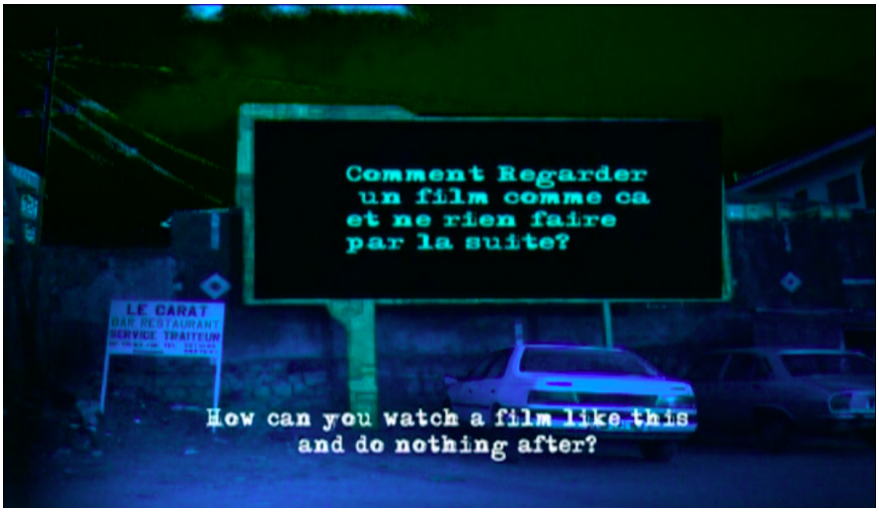

Figure 46

A celebration of female companionship and sexual freedom, *Les Saignantes* reimagines maternal support as a supernatural power, a literal *esprit de corps* that works on and through the body for a larger collective purpose. If storytelling works much the same way, then we might see Bekolo's erotic genre film as a way to engage all our senses, to draw us into an all-consuming experience of fantasy, love, and revenge that awakens the dormant political potential within us.

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Tey: The Body and the Body Politic

As if to echo *Les Saignantes*, the opening sequence of Alain Gomis' film *Tey* appears at first to depict spiritual possession. Saatche, the main character, awakens in a sweat, looking at his body in terror as if it no longer belongs to him. As it happens, Saatche has been visited by a premonition of his own imminent death. In the world of *Tey*, death can warn of its coming a day in advance, and the title of the film refers to the span of time left to Saatche to say goodbye to his loved ones, to participate in his memorial services, to make funerary arrangements, and to walk through the city one last time. Yet as we will see, through death at first appears to be some kind of physical ailment, it comes to signify a different kind of occupying presence, haunting not only Saatche's body but the entire city of Dakar.

In following Saatche around the city, *Tey* retraces much of the territory we have seen in *Nha Fala* and *Les Saignantes*, probing the relationships between the sensorial, the political, and the morbid, but in *Tey*, it is the notion of the boundary line between the body and the body politic that takes on special significance. Faced with the imminence and inevitability of death, Saatche feels the constraints of his body as if inhabiting it for the first time, but he also begins to experience these limitations as a kind of freedom. *Tey*'s concept of political participation begins with this experience of the physical body: its border with the material world, porous to sight, sound, and sensation. Saatche's fatal condition ultimately draws him over this border, allowing him to join other social and political bodies, and granting him new experiences of participation and belonging.

Gomis' film addresses these themes using the conventions of fantasy and speculative fiction, playing on our sense of discovery as we explore the rules and rituals of a strange new world. But Gomis also draws on the opposite aesthetic: documentary and realist modes. During

Saatche's final day in this fantastic universe, he wanders into a very specific time and place: Dakar's city center in the summer of 2011, the site of massive protests against the former president Abdoulaye Wade (President 2000-2012).[291] In the film, Saatche observes real crowds of protesters storm the Place de l'Indépendence as he ponders the end of his life. Part magical realism, part docufiction, *Tey* trains us to see the utopian in the mundane. Through the permeable boundaries of genre, *Tey* suggests that cinema is more than a means of information or entertainment, but also a sensorial, social, and political practice that is integral to our experience of the world.

The youngest of the filmmakers featured here, Alain Gomis might just as accurately be called a global filmmaker as an African one. Born in 1972 in Paris, Gomis describes himself as French with Bissau-Guinean and Senegalese origins. Gomis studied film at the Sorbonne and has since made four feature films, each of which explores the complex geographies of contemporary global metropoles. In Gomis' films, itinerants, immigrants, and supplicants cross urban spaces, connecting the seemingly different worlds that collide in European and African cities. His first two feature films, *L'Afrance* (2001) and *Andalucia* (2007) treat different aspects of the African immigrant experience in Europe and are inspired by the personal experiences of Gomis' family members. *Tey* is Gomis' third feature film, and though it does not dwell on the theme of immigration, Saatche is known to have recently returned to Dakar from the United States. Like *Tey*, Gomis' most recent film, *Felicité* (2017), starring the Congolese singer Véro Tshanda Beya, incorporates musical performance much like Mweze Ngangura's *La Vie Est Belle* did with Papa Wemba.

[291] Wade and his administration had for years been publicly accused of nepotism, corruption, misuse of public funds, and intimidation of the press. In 2011, Wade announced his bid for an unconstitutional third term, sparking the protests.

Gomis is known for incorporating diverse sources into his cinema. Mambety's influence can be felt in Gomis' easy mingling of humor and surrealism, but Gomis finds inspiration in other global masters of the medium, such as Sergei Eisenstein, Carl Theodor Dreyer, F.W. Murnau, Jean Vigo, Yasujirō Ozu, and Andrei Tarkovsky. Gomis downplays the "foreignness" of film from other countries, claiming that film is "the best place to face yourself – especially films coming from other parts of the world; they can tell you more about yourself than your next-door neighbor, even your best friends or your brother or sister."[292] Gomis suggests that film is always a foreign space in its own right, a space of distance from which one can better see the familiar. As we will see in *Tey*, Gomis uses Saatche's proximity to death to play with an effect of foreignness, imagining that a man about to die would come full circle, seeing the world for the last time as if he were seeing it for the very first.

Much like Bekolo, Gomis regrets that his creative impulses are often undermined by the pressures of getting funding for his films. "What is difficult today," Gomis told Indiewire in 2013, "is fighting with the big industry. It's like every film has to follow the same rules. It's a shame – it's like poverty to me the way every film has to tell the story the same way and that after ten minutes you already know where the film is going and you understand everything. I love films that create a totally different world and are totally surprising – this is my pleasure."[293] For its part, *Tey* exemplifies Gomis' iconoclastic approach to film convention. Though *Tey* satisfies the basic conventions of fantasy and science fiction-- a futuristic, suspenseful atmosphere, violence, love, revenge, and at least one action sequence---Gomis' viewers can never retreat to the familiar logic of the genre. *Tey* asks if it is possible for science-fiction to be

[292] Steffan Horowitz, "Alain Gomis Talks Story, Style, Inspiration & World Of '*Tey*,'" *Indiewire*, October 3, 2013. http://www.indiewire.com/2013/10/interview-alain-gomis-talks-story-style-inspiration-world-of-tey-opens-in-nyc-this-weekend-164738/
[293] Ibid.

poetic and elliptical, if a fantasy world can serve as an intimate space of reflection, and if both genres can withstand the incursion of a real city and real political stakes.

We explore the world of *Tey* through the eyes of Saatche, played by the American actor and poet Saul Williams, whose physical presence serves to guide us more than his character history or personality. Deprived of a concrete backstory, Saatche is a cypher who reacts to the news of his death and the events it sets in motion with the same perplexity and passivity we do as viewers.[294] Saatche is introduced in a way that recalls Gregor Samsa of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*: he wakes up to find that his own body is unfamiliar to him. The sense of foreignness that haunts Saatche is enhanced by the fact that, though he appears in scenes in which Wolof, French, and Mandjak are spoken, Williams is an anglophone African-American actor. Gomis tells *Indiewire* that he wrote the script with Williams in mind, knowing that he would be cast in a role with very few speaking lines. Gomis wanted Williams to react authentically to the mysterious universe of *Tey* as a literal foreigner, to better embody Saatche's encounter with the uncanny.[295]

The opening sequences of *Tey* invite viewers to experience an elaborate culture of death. When Saatche swings open the bedroom door, he finds his extended family assembled like guardians, waiting to guide him through the rituals for those whose deaths are foretold. Each reacts to his presence differently: some are weeping, others are calm and attentive to Saatche's needs, others stand by in stoic silence. As Gomis told *Indiewire*, he instructed these cast members, most of whom are non-professionals, to imagine Saatché as a loved one.[296] This technique has a long history in African film, which frequently relied on non-professional actors.

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[294] Gomis writes, "Je voulais décrire cette drôle de sensation d'avoir atterri quelque part dans un corps, dans une famille, dans une histoire qui aurait pu être toute autre." "La volonté du silence: Entretien avec Alain Gomis," *Cahiers du cinéma* 685 (2013): 28.

[295] Horowitz, "Alain Gomis Talks Story."

[296] Gomis says, "It was almost as if we were doing [the filming] live. Everything about it was really true and genuine. I don't know why, but sometimes it's magic. You're acting, but at the same time, it becomes real or true. People were really crying!" Ibid.

Actors are requested to play a version of themselves, or, as Gomis puts it, to exist somewhere "between living and acting."[297] In *Tey*, these actors are asked not just to play themselves, but to perform a relationship from their real lives. Acting alongside Williams, they must envision a stranger as a son, brother, lover, cousin, or friend. In the context of *Tey*'s storyline, however, the viewer sees precisely the opposite: Saatche is their loved one made foreign by death. Drawing on a tradition of francophone African semi-documentary, Gomis uses his actors' imaginations to heighten the realism of *Tey*'s fantasy.

As Saatche is led to a courtyard ceremony, we witness the first of many rituals that highlight the complicated and contradictory ways in which Saatche's impending death is interpreted by his community. After a libation and animal sacrifice, Saatche's father speaks to the assembly, giving thanks and praise to God for having "chosen" Saatche. When the crowd is given an opportunity to speak about Saatche, we hear some words of praise and love, but others express disappointment, even anger. Saatche listens to the grievances with an expression of suppressed shame, but makes no attempt to respond or beg for forgiveness. Throughout the film, Saatche--whose name means "thief" in Wolof--will continue to hear from close friends and family, many of whom do not see his death as a gift from God, but as an aggressive act, a voluntary abandonment of a common future, a reckless sundering of social ties. For much of the film, Saatche's pained passivity will be his only response. Suspended between the living and dead, still alive and yet without a future, Saatche can offer nothing to his loved ones except to surrender fully to the agony of losing them.

Where the rituals of the courtyard ceremony were formal, structured, and intensely emotional, those performed outside in Saatche's neighborhood follow a completely different

[297] "Interview de Alain Gomis," *Today/Aujourd'hui/Tey*, directed by Alain Gomis (2013: Paris: Jour2Fete, 2013), DVD.

logic. Spontaneous and upbeat, Gomis' neighborhood scenes use the power of improvisation to relax the rhythm of the narrative and lend it an air of easy realism. Gomis explains that this effect was partly a function of filming in the street, where fiction would inevitably confront reality. Though Gomis was working with a script, he pared it down to a rough framework to allow for improvisation during the open air scenes.[298] Gomis describes his directorial role here as "sculpting inside the scene," giving general instructions but allowing the non-professional actors free to express themselves as they saw fit.[299] When Saatche's neighbors notice that he has emerged from his house, accompanied by his friend Sélé (Djolof Mbengue), they begin rooting around for impromptu offerings: a baguette, a sneaker, a live chicken, peanuts, a Playstation controller, whatever tokens of affection come to hand. Women on a rooftop pitch their underwear down to Saatche, an auto mechanic hands him spare parts for a mock crown and scepter, and a *griotte* offers him a praise song. As the scene ends, the loose ends suddenly come together into what could almost be described as a musical number, in which the whole neighborhood gathers to drum and cheer in unison, sending Saatche off in triumph as he leaves the neighborhood for the last time.

In the juxtaposition of these two scenes--the courtyard and the neighborhood--we can already see Gomis' unusual way of delineating cinematic spaces, a spatialization of genre. Like a series of cinematic tableaux, *Tey* unfolds in a series of discrete locations, linked only by Saatche's and Sélé's journey across them. Each space contains its own horizon for generic possibility, new shades and saturations of magical realism, drama, musical, and documentary, and is confined by a boundary line, whether material (such as a doorway) or invisible (made palpable by the actors or the camerawork). As Saatche and Sélé cross these thresholds, often by

[298] Ibid.
[299] "La volonté du silence," *Cahiers du cinéma,* 28.

way of some small ritual gesture, they also cross a narrative threshold, plunging us into a new rhythm, mood, and aesthetic.

What one might easily miss as we move from scene to scene is that each presents us with a unique temporality. At its core, *Tey* is a countdown movie, a storyline played out over a single day, and though it does not use real time to count the minutes, the action is propelled by time's passage, much like Mambety's beloved *High Noon*, or Agnes Varda's *Cléo de 5 à 7/Cleo From 5 to 7* (1962). Though Gomis uses a range of aesthetic techniques, the extreme close-up is crucial to the way he shapes our experience of time. Coaxing the sights and sounds of cinema into a fuller representation of human sensation in time, Gomis' close-ups refract sound-images into a spectrum of haptic and olfactory experiences. With this technique, Gomis can make time heavy and suffocating. Saatche's breathing rhythms, his sweat, and his pores become a corporeal reminder of mortality, his body a subtle "revealer of the deadline" as Gilles Deleuze has called it. Yet Gomis can also make time expand leisurely before us, capturing droplets of water running down a chin, a dramatic beam of light, the rumble and sputter of a taxi engine, and the unexpected intensity of a stranger's gaze. We are invited to share Saatche's sensory experience, to feel the cold water and the warm light [Figure 47], to smell the motor oil and the black smoke, to startle at sudden intimacy with a stranger. Against the relentless passage of time, we are comforted with moments of brief but intense connection to the many people and places Saatche encounters, each held up as a universe in and of itself.

Figure 47

If *Tey* recalls films like *High Noon* or *Cléo de 5 à 7,* its magical characteristics set it apart. Unlike Cléo, who copes with her diagnosis alone amid the anomie of public life, Saatche is supported by his friends, family, and acquaintances who have already been notified by some unknown mechanism. "May no one delay him today!" a neighbor declares as Saatche steps into the street. *Tey* makes the process of dying supernaturally legible, at least at first. As we follow Saatche deeper into the interior of Dakar, a concentric pattern emerges. On the level of the story, Saatche is getting closer to the center of the city, away from the personal sphere and into public life. On the level of production, Gomis' shooting locations also become increasingly enmeshed in the fabric of Dakar, out of the private sphere which can be bounded and controlled. Yet Gomis manages to fully incorporate this effect into the narrative. Though Saatche is publicly recognized as a marked man less and less, people stare occasionally, as if the aura of death were faint but detectable. Gomis chooses not to provide an autonomous fantasy world, but insists on grounding his vision in everyday urban life.

Where the signs of the supernatural fade, everyday material struggles rush in to take their place. Sélé and Saatche begin to encounter ominous images and signs of discontent. Their taxi driver complains in Wolof about the price of gas and the difficulty of making a living. A man on the street whispers a solemn request to a prayer bird before setting it free. The camera observes

live poultry bound and struggling on the side of the road. Subtle signs of strife--visual, inaudible, or in untranslated Wolof--are almost below our level of perception, and are instead expressed subtly in tone, bearing, and gaze.[300] Later, when Saatche is deep in the city center, he buys a coconut from a young vendor, who tells him that he owes his religious teacher "as much as my heart can bear." We hear complaints of gas and coal shortages and strikes. Our perspective begins to shift subtly: Saatche's plight fades in and out of focus, as if we can no longer be certain if the dying Saatche is a sufferer or a witness to suffering. With the heightened sensation of seeing everything for the last time, Saatche's condition renders him more vulnerable than ever to the pain of those around him, though for now, he is still only a helpless observer.

Yet, in what is arguably the most important sequence of the film, Saatche begins to change. Having traveled across much of downtown Dakar, Saatche decides to take time to attend to the details of his funerary rites. He goes to the home of "Uncle," an elderly corpse washer (Thierno N'diaye), to ask him to be the one to take care of his body the next day. But Uncle is more than a corpse washer. Though Uncle's courtyard seems ordinary in every way, filled with the normal debris of everyday life and even the odd visitor standing by, we have the impression of being transported to an allegorical plane. Saatche takes the opportunity to ask why has he been chosen to die, and how he can be expected to die when he has not been able to make something of himself yet. If "Uncle" at first seems a father figure to Saatche, it soon becomes clear that he represents a far more authoritative force--that of Death itself. Uncle explains to Saatche that he has all the time he needs. There are people in his midst, Uncle says, "who have less time left than you, only they don't know it. Strangely, you have more time than others." With this reassurance, Uncle demonstrates for Saatche the purification rituals that will be performed on his body when

[300] Alain Gomis tells *Cahiers* that he chose to leave some Wolof dialogue untranslated: "On s'est tous retrouvés dans des pays dont on ne parle pas la langue; on a alors une écoute différente, une attention aux choses modifiée. On perçoit à tort ou à raison des sentiments, des émotions particulières." *Cahiers du cinema*, 28.

he dies: he mimes pushing the fluid out of Saatche's body, washing him in the order dictated by Islamic custom, anointing him with oil, and finally covering him with a sheet. In this moment we revisit the details of Saatche's body, the surfaces and volumes with which we have been familiarized throughout the film, now experienced as human contact. Though it is a mock ritual, prefiguring what will occur the following day, this experience of touch at the limits of the human body and of human existence has a real, if not immediately visible, effect on Saatche. By the time he returns home at the end of the film, Saatche will take Uncle's words to heart and begin living his life oriented toward the future, however limited that future may be.

Yet before Saatche returns home, he finishes his journey to the center of the city, going to the nearby public square of the Place de l'Indépendence. It is here that the elements of realism and magical realism that have been in tension throughout the film finally merge and become indistinguishable. As Saatche leads us into the crowded square, the music builds to a climax and the images we see in the street become more surreal. When a young man launches a Molotov cocktail into a line of state security forces, we are suddenly plunged into the 2011 protests. Though many of the images we see are taken from live footage of the event, they are interwoven with staged scenes, so we can no longer tell what belongs to Gomis' fantastic world and what does not.[301] A man recounts the spirits he encountered while making the dangerous journey to Europe, a pair of mysterious dancers make their way around the perimeter of the Place de l'Indépendence, and an elegant *sapeur* shows off his ensemble. The boundary line between what is realistic and what is fantastic no longer makes sense; the real has exceeded the surreal, and our sense of where the film begins and ends can no longer be trusted. Riot police subdue the crowds, young men go mad with rage, while others appear badly beaten, possibly even dead. A man tells

[301] Gomis explains that he shot this footage of the demonstrations while living in Dakar in the summer of 2011 and later spliced it into scenes with Saul Williams. Ibid.

the camera, “We’re fed up with this!” echoing the rallying cry of the summer protests. “Thieves!” he accuses. Gomis shows us a city possessed, infected with a desire for justice, reaching a fever pitch in this square, the symbol of Senegal’s nationalist dreams. If we were initially awed by the image of a man on the verge of death, now Saatche halts before the sublimity of the crowd at the Place de l'Indépendence, before these men and women who risk everything for their cause.

When the crowds disperse and this climactic scene fades away, Saatche returns home to find that his wife Rama (Anisia Uzeyman) refuses his gaze, his touch, his very presence in their home. Rama explains brusquely that Saatche’s death is hard enough for her to accept without having to linger on it. Deprived of his wife’s love, Saatche tries to find ways to be useful at home, and his actions seem to indicate his renewed hope for the future he has left and the future that will come after he is gone. He fixes the hinge of a door and plays contentedly with his young children, despite the knowledge that the door will only be opened after he has gone, that his children will grow old without his presence. When Saatche and Rama finally embrace, we are invited to marvel at the power of human touch. Again we are overcome with a sense of the abstract and ethereal, as Rama and Saatche meet face to face in the pure white space between their bed sheets [Figure 48]. Much as we saw with *Nha Fala*, the act of making love seems to banish the specter of death, and at long last, Saatche and Rama are able to recover a sense of shared pleasure.

Figure 48

With this change, our sense of time, once so precisely calibrated to Saatche's departure, begins to follow a new leisurely rhythm. Rama brings out charcoal to make dinner, and we observe her as she blows on the coals and eases dumpling dough into hot oil. After the meal, Saatche and Rama talk in the courtyard, sometimes animatedly, sometimes restfully as the sun sets and the final call to prayer can be heard. Before the film ends and they go to bed for the night, we come to realize that the logic of this world may be more metaphoric than magical, that the fantastic forces leading Saatche to his death may represent the forces of time that are as much a part of our universe as they are of his. Having given into fatalism from the outset of the film, we, like Saatche, are mercifully released from it before the film ends, long enough to linger in this world that no longer seems very different from our own.

In the end, *Tey* leaves us with more questions than answers. Gomis' non-didactic style remains evocative rather than instructive. Yet in leading us into metaphorical and allegorical territory, Gomis asks us to see Saatche's journey across Dakar anew. Confronted with his mortality, Saatche tries to spend his last day on earth differently: to change himself, to make living count. Yet he is paralyzed, unable to speak or intervene in the world taking place all around him. He is unwilling to count himself among the living, among those who are responsible for making their own future. We might draw some similarities between Saatche's condition and

the difficulties of mass political action in an age of despair. Gomis has characterized the 2011 political movement in Senegal as follows:

> [2011] was a fantastic moment, but at the same time there was also this feeling that, like other places in the world, you had a population that wanted to act politically, but [didn't know how – couldn't find the means]…it was like a movement without words. It was just like "it's enough!," but trying to go through such a political construction is difficult for a lot of these movements...You see a lot of people who want to act, but have a problem with which way to proceed.[302]

If *Tey* offers a lesson for overcoming political inertia, we might find it in the process by which Saatche makes his way through *Tey*'s universe. Saatche's condition forces him to navigate the generic conventions of fantasy and science-fiction-- rituals marking time and transitions, comprehensive social networks shaped and reshaped by futuristic conditions and vast, utopian spaces of infinite potential that a new world can offer. Yet he is still alive, and much like the viewer, Saatche must learn to synthesize the otherworldly with the mundanity of daily life. Through the figure of Saatche, Gomis suggests that artistic practice can be a revolutionary tool, teaching us to see--and hear, smell, and feel-- the limitless potential in the everyday.

This brings us finally to the role of imagination and sensation in postcolonial aesthetics and politics. *Nha Fala*, as we have seen, argues that the body--as a site of expression, of relation, and of pleasure--is an essential part of political participation. *Les Saignantes* suggests that art is an ineffable yet singularly powerful means of accessing our minds and bodies, pushing us to extend the limits of our imagination and our conceptions of political possibility. Similarly, *Tey* attributes tremendous social and political power to the interplay between the sensory and the imaginative. Without special effects, seemingly through sheer force of suggestion, Gomis transforms everyday life in the city of Dakar into an otherworldly experience. As Saatche takes in the details of the city--the sun and soundscape, the textures of things--we sense that the

[302] "It's enough" or, "we're fed up" refers to the primary slogan of the anti-Wade movement, "y'en a marre." Horowitz, "Alain Gomis Talks Story."

utopian always contains a virtual and material dimension, that it is always a function of both the human eye and the mind's eye. Saatche's condition is a state of mind, a fiction carried into the world, one no less real for its virtuality. Like the actors in *Tey*, who practice a form of empathetic imagination in service of their art, we the spectators are already practicing a utopian drama in both real and virtual space. As both a model of film production and spectatorship, *Tey* champions the power of these kinds of fictions to shape our experience of the world and our behavior in concrete ways.

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In reviving the francophone African genre film, Gomes, Bekolo, and Gomis depart from FEPACI-era doctrine, articulating a new conception of political consciousness and restoring to popular film an important social and political role. If we are to strive for a new sense of embodied social and political consciousness, these filmmakers propose cinema as a tool uniquely suited for its cultivation. In placing the human body and its needs at the center of politics, these films argue that politics cannot afford to do away with pleasure. If we are to imagine political and social alternatives and build a community organized for change, they suggest we must return to pleasure as a political objective in itself. The inclusion of pleasure in political movements need not come at the expense of direct confrontation and struggle; rather it allows us to begin coming to terms with the atomization, demoralization, and desperation of the years since independence. More than anything, these films assert that the lessons of decolonization alone cannot teach us how to respond to the concerns of the present day. In trying to seduce film, popular culture, and political will into common company, these filmmakers respond to a contemporary world in which the rift between the culture of everyday life and revolution needs mending.

Though the arts of dying represent a new direction for francophone African aesthetics, they aim to renew a relationship with the past, not break with it. If the old is dying and the new cannot be reborn, if the dreams of decolonization are a dead letter, these films remind us of art's power to unsettle the difference between past and present, the literal and the metaphoric, tragedy and farce, and the living and the dead. As Mbembe suggests, the past is not so easily betrayed, particularly by cinema: "If it has disappeared, the past is not yet out of frame. It is still there, in the form of a mental image. We cross it out, rub it out, erase it, replace it, recreate its form and content. We proceed by continuity errors, dissonance, substitutions, and montage--the conditions to attain a new aesthetic force."[303] These films remind us that theirs is a palimpsestic medium, written in the the language of the material world and projected back onto it. Film without memory is inconceivable, these films insist: the trick is learning how to see it. Sloughing off the dystopian spell of the contemporary moment, francophone African film urges us to engage the totality of our desires and explore the far reaches of our imagination so that we may lead ourselves out of the fatal and fatalistic present.

[303] "S'il a disparu, le passé n'est cependant pas hors champ. Il est encore là, sous la forme d'une image mentale. On rature, on gomme, on remplace, on efface, on recrée les formes et les contenus. On procède par de faux raccords, des discordances, des substitutions et des montages-- conditions pour atteindre une force esthétique neuve." Ibid., 225.

Epilogue

Why did certain cinema genres consistently return to elegiac images of Africa over the course of the 20th century, and why does contemporary African cinema still find elegy so useful for thinking about itself? Elegy's persistence no doubt reflects a continuity of crisis, one stemming not only from the legacy of colonialism but the contemporary forms of mass violence and global predation that show no signs of abatement. The films examined in this dissertation, brought together by their shared sense of grief, vary widely in their characterization of the existential crisis at hand, in their attribution of blame, and their degree of faith in an eventual resolution or reckoning. Yet they hold in common a sense that cinema can and must intervene, even as the possibility for meaningful political cinema seems to have receded. As such, the study of elegy and African cinema cannot help but measure the gap between African cinema as it exists and the ideals and ambitions that produced it. In examining the different shapes and powers African cinema might have assumed, the expansive dimensions it might have achieved, I have tried to understand the conditions--whether aesthetic, cultural, or material--which limited its forms of expression and avenues of engagement.

In threading together the history of elegy and African cinema, I have argued that Africa plays a much larger role in the global history of cinema than is generally acknowledged. Chapters 1 and 2 suggest that key figures and movements in cinema history were produced through a complex series of interactions with African subjects, points of contact characterized by competing and convergent objectives, by dialogue and psychological projection, and by vastly unequal power relations. Rather than understanding cinema's "arrival" in postcolonial Africa as that of a pre-existing technology, these two chapters show that it was only through the African subject that new cinematic forms, styles, and canons were constructed. Chapters 3 and 4 argue

that contemporary African film continues to reckon with images of the African subject and African cinema that have outlived their utility. In considering the post-Sembenian landscape of francophone African cinema, Chapters 3 and 4 show filmmakers fighting to make the medium their own, not only through post-national perspectives and engagement with commercial and popular forms, but by working at the intersection of theory, criticism, and practice. Once conceived as a bold political force, African cinema now addresses itself to a different question: does African film have political utility? If these films continue to answer in the affirmative, it is only after dispensing with the notion of African film as a sublime repository of dreams, of redemption, reconciliation, or as a source of deep human truths. In an age in which the chronic deferral of justice seems to have reached an acute phase, African cinema has had to rethink its reasons for being. Marrying the meta- and intertextual to the sensorial and sensitive, contemporary francophone African cinema struggles to halt the recurring nightmare of aporetic loss and rouse us from deep political hibernation.

In francophone African cinema's turn to a more fundamental act of self-questioning, I see the beginnings of a new relationship between film and political action. In the exhaustion of successive visions of African cinema, contemporary African cinema asks not what to substitute in their place, but what it means to reimagine ideals and by what process of perception such a utopian transformation can occur and be exercised collectively. In his discussion of contemporary utopian texts, Fredric Jameson highlights their tendency to focus on the capacity to conceive and construct utopia rather than the representation of an already realized utopian vision. In focusing on the mechanism, "which already contains process or activity within itself as method or virtuality," Jameson writes, contemporary utopian literature "tends to obscure that fundamental structural characteristic of Utopia, which defines and enables it fully as much as it

passes judgment on it, namely, the omission of agency: the obligation for Utopia to remain an unrealizable fantasy."[304] If films like *Tey* emphasize the dying of the contemporary order, a deliberate break with reality as we know it, they also demonstrate the facility with which we may see a future world in the current one, an alternative struggling to emerge before our eyes. In finally rejecting the visions of the cinema it was supposed to have become, African elegiac film has become a cinema of vision: a tool for imagination, relation, and change.

[304] Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (New York: Verso, 2005), 227.

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