IN THE PRESENCE OF THE RACIALISED BODY: (POST-)COLONIAL ICONOGRAPHIES IN *DAHOMEY*, *SAINT OMER* AND *STOP FILMING US, BUT LISTEN**

ANA AITANA FERNÁNDEZ MORENO
BRUNELLA TEDESCO BARLOCCO

After the screening of *Saint Omer* (Alice Diop, 2022) at the New York Film Festival, Alice Diop described its protagonist as "a woman who is not just confined to her *Négritude*, who is more than a Black woman, who is a complex woman" (Film at Lincoln Center, 2022). For the filmmaker, this assertion constitutes a "political statement" (Film at Lincoln Center, 2022) precisely because of the use of the term *Négritude*—defined by Aimé Césaire as the "consciousness of difference" but also as an instrument of the revolution "against European reductionism"[1] (Césaire, 2006: 86)—and because it is this complexity that breaks with the stereotype of the Black woman historically constructed from the perspective of the Global North. This imaginary, which can also be traced back to Orientalist discourses (Said, 2002), persists today in media images and narratives of migration flows from the Global South. The tropes of transgression or savagery associated with male corporealities and of motherhood and care attributed to their female counterparts, along with the image of the white saviour, thus feed a colonialist iconography that is exposed and challenged in the work of filmmakers of African descent such as Mati Diop and Alice Diop, both born in France to Senegalese parents. In their respective oeuvres, both these filmmakers (who share a surname but are not related) have explored the contradictions arising from a colonialist heritage that has left them split between two identities: African and European. As Alice Diop explained in an interview: "Essentially, I am French. All my culture is French, but I discovered Ousmane Sembène too late. I come to films in

Wolof as an outsider" (Latif, 2023, n.p.). This is an issue that both directors raise again in their most recent films, each one of which has been awarded at a major European festival: *Dahomey* (Mati Diop, 2024) receiving the Golden Bear at the Berlinale; and *Saint Omer* winning the Grand Jury Prize and the Lion of the Future Award at the Venice Film Festival.

Along the same lines as the two films mentioned above, the Congolese documentary *Stop Filming Us, but Listen* (Bernadette Vivuya, Kagoma Ya Twahirwa, 2022), which has been screened at various specialised festivals (Berlin Human Rights Film Festival; the Human Rights Watch Film Festival), serves as a response to the documentary *Stop Filming Us* (2020) by the Dutch filmmaker Joris Postema, who initiates a debate in his film about whether "talking *about* someone" is in reality "talking *for* someone", questioning the neo-colonial practices reproduced in films and photographs of Africa. The two Congolese filmmakers use footage from Postema's film to add two essential questions to this debate, related to the degree of agency they have over their own representation, and to how colonialist stereotypes can be effectively destroyed.

In light of these questions, this article analyses the three films mentioned above to examine how they challenge this inherited iconography and uncover new forms of post-colonial representation. These constructive exercises are pursued either by active questioning of colonialist discourse and representation (*Stop Filming Us, but Listen; Dahomey*), or by exploring ambiguities and complexities that point beyond the boundaries of the categories of truth in the Global North (*Saint Omer*). And in all three films, the racialised body focuses the debate as it bears the historical scars of European colonialism (Ahmed, 2002).

THESE CONSTRUCTIVE EXERCISES ARE PURSUED EITHER BY ACTIVE QUESTIONING OF COLONIALIST DISCOURSE AND REPRESENTATION (*STOP FILMING US, BUT LISTEN; DAHOMEY*), OR BY EXPLORING AMBIGUITIES AND COMPLEXITIES THAT POINT BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES OF THE CATEGORIES OF TRUTH IN THE GLOBAL NORTH (*SAINT OMER*)

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON POST-COLONIAL ICONOGRAPHY

Post-colonial perspectives on cinema expose the Eurocentrism of media representations (Shohat and Stam, 2014) and the persistence of an "imperial gaze" capable of creating images and modes of viewing predicated on the absence of the colonised subject or on the portrayal of that subject as a figure outside modernity: wild, primitive, pre-rational, exotic and eroticised. "[C]inema invented a geographically incoherent Orient, where a simulacrum of coherence was produced through the repetition of visual leitmotifs" (Shohat, 2006: 47).

For Sandra Ponzanesi, post-colonial cinema is defined by its concern with hegemony and patterns of oppression and resistance, and with problematising filmmaking as a language, a technology and an industry. In this sense, Ponzanesi explains, post-colonial cinema "opens occluded frames and proposes a new engagement with the visual that is decolonized and de-orientalized, [...] breaking down the *grands récits* and opening the space for specificities that refract larger, often repressed, omitted or deleted, unofficial histories of nations, communities, genders and subaltern groups" (2017: 30).

At this point, it is important to acknowledge certain controversies surrounding the concept of the post-colonial identified by Ella Shohat (2008), who observes that the "post-colonial" lends itself to "ahistorical and universalizing de-

ployments [with] potentially depoliticizing implications", used as a substitute for the dubious qualifier "third world" and aligned, thanks to the prefix "post-", with another set of concepts that "underline a passage into a new period and a closure of a certain historical event or age" (1992: 101). The connotations of universalism (which implies an erasure of the specific sociohistorical dynamics of colonisation characteristic of each colonised territory) and periodisation (which suggests a clear chronology of "before" and "after") seem to betray the very objectives of this theoretical approach. Shohat, however, argues for a "flexible yet critical" use of the term that can "address the politics of location", which is important "not only for pointing out historical and geographical contradictions and differences, but also for reaffirming historical and geographical links, structural analogies, and openings for agency and resistance" (Shohat, 1992: 112). The notion of rupture contained in in the prefix "post-", the possibility of a "beyond" (in contrast to the neo-colonial, which merely emphasises "the new modes and forms of the old colonialist practices" [Shohat, 1992: 106]), allows for discontinuity, for the destructuring of discourses and imaginaries as a foundation for the emergence of new registers.

The films analysed in this study call into question the different forms of epistemological violence derived from the European colonial narrative and attempt to deconstruct them in the interests of constructing subjectivities, discourses and representations of their own. In the analysis of these procedures of representation that "speak *for*" subjects instead of allowing them to speak for/*about* themselves (as called out by Spivak, 2009), epistemological violence is exposed as a form of violence

> perpetrated against or through knowledge, [...] one of the key elements in any process of domination. This is achieved not only through the construction of economic ties of exploitation or through the control of the political-military apparatus, but also [...] through the construction of epistemic frameworks that legitimise and exalt these practices of domination (Galván-Álvarez, 2010: 12).

The analysis presented in this article focuses on how these films mobilise discourse and the gaze as acts of resistance, and on how they speak to the scars of colonisation and the notion of historical restitution or reparation. In their configuration of their own language and images, each of these films becomes a vehicle for the mutation of visual motifs (Balló, 2000; Balló and Bergala, 2016), a process of resignification that connects with the general idea of deconstructing and challenging the discourses and visual regimes constructed by the "colonial gaze" on the colonised subjects. The motifs identified in these films move beyond the imaginary of migration flows and former colonies promoted by the Global North to embrace others related to the place of the spectator, the artwork, court proceedings and motherhood, which, although they may not appear to be, are equally encoded by the dynamics of racialisation.

As forms of an "iconographic model of cultural representation that is transmitted and reinterpreted through the history of images to foster narrative and emotional recognition" (Balló, Salvadó and Cairol, 2020: 60), visual motifs reflect cinema's ability to revive "images that seemed to have been established in the motionlessness of pictorial representation" (Balló, 2000: 11). However, in this case, the model of representation is articulated mainly by means of media images. As visual motifs are established through repetition, narrative economy and the persistence of iconographic imaginaries, the analysis of their mutation, deconstruction or resignification will reveal their status as the product of hegemonic discourses that themselves are capable of reproducing power dynamics and forms of epistemological violence.

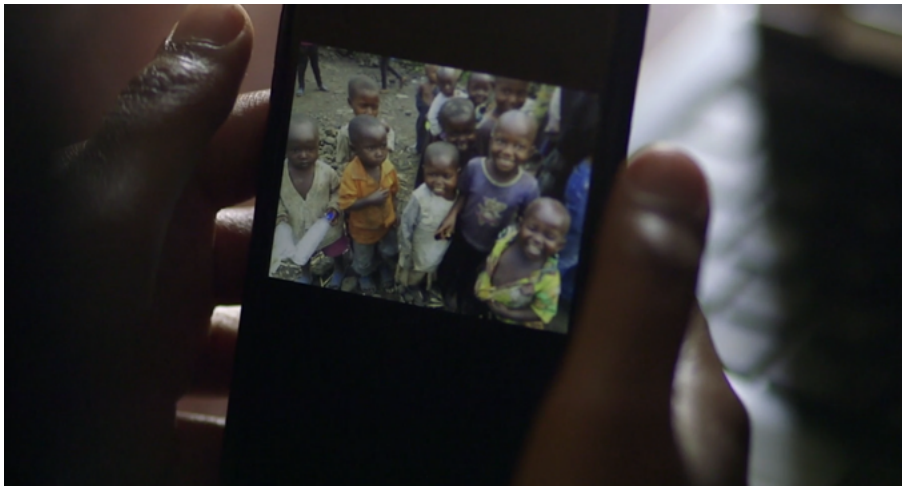
RECONSIDERING THE INHERITED GAZE: *STOP FILMING US, BUT LISTEN* (BERNADETTE VIVUYA, KAGOMA YA TWAHIRWA, 2022)

In the opening sequence of *Stop Filming Us, but Listen*, the camera enters Yole!Africa, a cultural and educational centre that was also behind the production of the film. A close-up shows the beam of light from a projector, followed by a reverse shot of the screen, being viewed by a Congolese audience. On the screen, a documentary about the history of Lake Kivu, the natural border separating Rwanda from the Democratic Republic of Congo, is being shown. The sound of the projector continues in the background while the camera focuses on different faces in the audience. Rather than identifying the spectator with the screen—"the spectator's gaze takes the position of the divine, omniscient and omnipresent eye, while being immersed in the acts and/or feelings of the characters" (Gómez Tarín, 2002: 22)—or depicting a supposedly passive audience (Morin, 1972), the camera clearly shows their annoyed reactions to what they are watching (Image 1).

Image 1. *Stop filming us, but listen* (Bernadette Vivuya, Kagoma Ya Twahirwa, 2022)

The visual motif of the spectator viewing the spectacle or sitting in a cinema (Balló, 2000) acquires a different dimension here, as later we hear the audience members' criticisms of what they have seen: "When the colonisers arrived, they tried to show that their point of view was better." This will be repeated several times in the film, both with the screening of other titles produced by the colonialist states, in which the gaze reflects the power imbalance between colonisers and natives, and with the analysis of images of inhabitants of rural areas taken by the photographer Ley Uwera for an NGO in accordance with the instructions given to him by the organisation (Image 2). This debate about the need for reflection on the African imaginary was already present in *Stop Filming Us*, which also criticises the humanitarian aesthetic underpinning motifs such as the "white saviour" (Fernández-Moreno, Tedesco-Barlocco, 2024), reinforced by the testi-

Image 2. *Stop filming us, but listen* (Bernadette Vivuya, Kagoma Ya Twahirwa, 2022)



monies of Congolese artists who claim the right to produce their own images, although they acknowledge the possibility that those images may also be infected by the colonising gaze.

What is interesting about Vivuya and Twahirgwa's film is the destabilisation of the point of view imposed by the assimilation of the spectator's omniscient eye with a colonial (and European white supremacist) perspective, which is displaced here by a post-colonial gaze. This new gaze is introduced firstly through the Congolese viewers and their constant expressions of incredulity, and secondly through the didactic role of Chérie Ndaliko, Director of Research and Education at Yole!Africa, who explains in detail how audiovisual language—the high-angle shot, for example, as a way of placing the viewer above the filmed subject—is used to support the construction of a persuasive colonial narrative. As Gómez Tarín argues, the spectator's power lies in the hermeneutic exercise, but the spectator will only be able to engage in that exercise through critical attention, "which is prevented by the very structure of the films and the acceptance of their codes after so many years of repetition" (2002: 31). Jacques Rancière alludes to this critical attention in his description of the emancipated spectator, a key idea for understanding the power dynamics in the image and how active interpretation can be achieved (Rancière, 2021: 12): "Emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting; [...] when we understand that viewing is also an action that confirms or transforms this distribution of positions."

Vivuya and Twahirwa constantly seek to reconstruct a critical gaze through the editing: the classical shot-reverse shot between the audience and the screen is disrupted here by placing the camera in the middle of the cinema, creating a *mise en abyme* in combination with Ndaliko's voice-over, which acts as the voice of the spectator. In this way, the film constructs the "oppositional gaze" described by bell hooks, recognising the interrogation of the outsider's gaze as a site of agency for the racialised audience: "the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating 'awareness' politicizes 'looking' relations: one learns to look a certain way in order to resist" (hooks, 1992: 116). The gaze as a site of opposition and confrontation emerges in the context of a breakdown or rupture, "when the spectator 'resists' complete identification with the film's discourse'" (Hooks, 1992: 117). While hooks focuses mostly on Black women spectators, she recognises both the absence of images and the stereotypical, dehumanising representations as triggers for a distance that facilitates "the pleasure of interrogation" rather than the pleasure of identification.

In the "outside-inside" dynamics described by Trinh T. Minh-Ha, *Stop Filming Us* can be understood as "giving voice" to the colonised Other, whose testimonies function as "devices of legitimation" to compensate for a "filmic Lack" (Minh-Ha, 1991: 67). *Stop Filming Us, but Listen*, on the other hand, does not just give voice to the Other; it makes the Other *the* voice that defines the discourse, that speaks in first person, creating sites of resistance. This is why Vivuya includes the same images of Goma filmed by Postema, replacing the Dutch filmmaker's voice with her own and displacing the Other with a Self who questions the colonising gaze: "Goma, the city that has seen me grow. Like a spider in a web I have woven my memories near the Nyiragongo volcano."

In this sense, the dialogue between the two films is constant. Thus, the question raised in *Stop Filming Us, but Listen* about whether the two white filmmakers who want to make a film about Africa should stay and keep filming or go home comes up again in the middle of the film. This time, the answer comes in the form of an assembly, a visual motif associated mainly with civic power as it is a symbol of community dialogue and collective participation. The camera moves around the group, stopping on the one speaking, and shaking in the hands of the camera operator. In the circle of dia-

logue, the camera functions as a podium or microphone. In this way, the mise-en-scène is shaped by a circular approach constructed around a montage of close-ups that allow us to see and hear each speaker, who acts as a kind of public spokesperson. All the speakers are framed on the same level and filmed from the same location. In fact, in the end the camera operator even hands over the camera to someone else so that he can give his own opinion as well.

Another strategy that deconstructs the "imperial gaze" is related to the visual motif of the white saviour, constructed as a "heroic and virtuous" colonising force responsible for civilising "a non-white, indigenous, and exotic savage" (Hughey, 2014: 8-10). Although the white saviour complex is mentioned in the first film when Postema gives some biscuits to children who have not asked for anything and is reprimanded by the Congolese members of his crew, *Stop Filming Us, but Listen* takes up the association of this motif with the classroom, one of the settings that appears most in the photographs of the Jesuit missions, which show the white teacher standing, sometimes beside a blackboard, surrounded by sitting African children and adults who are watching him attentively. This image is a reflection of the white saviour syndrome, based on the notion that racialised people "supposedly lack the capacity to seek change and thus become perceived as dispossessed of historical agency. Any progress or success tends to result from the succor of the white individual, which suggests that escaping poverty or ignorance happens only through the savior's intelligence" (Cammarota, 2011: 244).

The composition in the classroom scene in *Stop Filming Us, but Listen* is similar, except that the teacher is not white and the scene is filmed quite differently. The camera moves around among the students, including Postema, and the teacher, the filmmaker Petna Ndaliko Katondolo. While in the photographs of the missions the only active figure is the white teacher, in this scene everyone takes part in the class dynamic, and the teacher is a Black man who, as shown throughout the documentary, is reflecting on who holds the power and privileges of foreign Caucasians in the production of images of Africa. Here, the blackboard plays a key role and the horizontal filming evokes another motif: that of the teacher or student at the blackboard who, as Valérie Vignaux suggests, "materialises educational projects", a strategy "that interrogates the role that figurative representation can play in the transmission of knowledge" (Vignaux, 2016: 392).

The deconstruction of the colonial gaze in *Stop Filming Us, but Listen* not only requires the spectator to listen to what the Congolese have to say about it, but also (and especially) involves the filming of everyday scenes that do not appear in the traditional imaginary of Africa, or the visual tropes or motifs that so many organisations and ethnographic documentaries deploy to depict the African reality. Young people playing sports, crowds at concerts, photography classes, art exhibitions, the celebration of the Congo International Film Festival and film screenings and conferences show different actions and reflect their agency over their own representation, proposing alternative tropes to those of traditional ethnographic documentaries and the humanitarian discourse of NGOs.

THE ARTWORK AS CURRENCY OF HISTORICAL RESTITUTION: *DAHOMEY* (MATI DIOP, 2024)

The form and register of *Dahomey* (Mati Diop, 2024) transcend binaries and stale categories of enunciation, while at the same time identifying an artwork as a visual motif that can function in terms of aesthetic appreciation or as an object of economic exchange (Berger, 1972). On the one hand, the film follows a linear trajectory, tracing the journey of 26 statues from the Kingdom of Dahomey (1600-1904) that the French had looted in the colonial period and that were subsequently exhibited at the Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques

Image 3. *Dahomey* (Mati Diop, 2024)

Chirac, in 1989, as African artworks. Thanks to a repatriation campaign, these 26 statues—which formed part of a collection of 7,000 looted objects—were returned to Benin. The film documents the different stages of their journey: the dismantling of the works and their packing for shipping, the preparations for their exhibition in Benin, their reception by the Beninese people, the critical debate over their repatriation, and finally their exhibition.

The second half of the film, mainly covering the debate over the repatriation at the University of Abomey-Calavi, integrates different critical perspectives on the restitution of the artworks and explores the capacity to construct discourse, the power of "speaking" (Image 3). According to the director, "[t]he only purpose of the film is for this debate to happen. It's not one amongst many ideas, it's the film itself, the gesture and meaning of this film. It's a counter point of view, a radical shift of paradigm, to switch the point of view to the space from where this story of dispossession should be told; from the view of the dispossessed" (Choudhury, 2024).

The young men and women who speak express points of view that not only cover a wide range of topics but sometimes involve opposing or conflicting positions. In this way, the film conveys the difficulty of achieving a united vision and the resistance against the homogenisation of a single discourse that could be identified as the consistent voice of the former colony, depicting the Other as a monolithic figure: these discordant voices reveal the conflicting emotions triggered by the complex processes of cultural, psychological, political and religious obliteration experienced in the former colonies, and the persistence of these processes in the post-colonial period, when the quest for healing and restitution has not followed a simple pattern. These discursive clashes also expose the fragility of understanding the concept of historical "reparations" as an effective erasure of both the tangible and intangible scars of colonisation.

The diversity of the testimonies is also evident in the conception of the artwork as a multifarious entity that can be understood as an artistic, ritualistic object, a political expression, a symbol or an element of cultural and social identity. Originally created for the performance of sacred rituals, the statues were extracted from their natural context and resignified in the French museum. This act (com-)modifies the object, turning it into an item of exchange, while at the same time transforming it from an artefact for use in spiritual rituals into a work valued for its aesthetic and economic value, and for its interpretation as a "primitive" or "exotic" object. It is in this ontological questioning—is it a *work of art* or not?—that one of the great ruptures with the visual motif of the artwork occurs: its status as an artwork is not inherent in the object, which was created for a different purpose, but constructed through a series of processes of resignification and exhibition initiated by the white colonist, the white gaze, and the exoticisation of the Other.

The idea of diversity and disagreement is not only reflected in the different opinions expressed, but also in the form of the film itself. Despite the apparently linear journey of the statues and the distanced, anthropological perspective with which their return is portrayed, Diop goes beyond

Image 4. *Dahomey* (Mati Diop, 2024)

the limits of the documentary form by including the voice of one of the statues as a recourse to magic that disrupts the film narrative and the object itself. Through this imaginary voice, with its own emotions and memory, Diop bestows a *discourse* upon an inanimate object that had until then been a mere *image*. The statue's name, "Number 26", reinforces this idea, as the statue, a portrait of King Ghezo, continues to bear the name given to it by the European colonists, a name that categorises and erases its historical origins and its meaning.

This strategy of vesting an object with a voice should be examined first and foremost for the change of register it involves. While the film can still be categorised as a documentary, the "animation" of the statue as an imaginative and generative act that only the audience is able to witness shifts it in generic terms towards the realm of the fantastic. According to Tzvetan Todorov's definition of this genre (1975), the statue's voice constitutes a supernatural event that appears to violate the laws of our natural world, and that elicits an affective response of doubt and hesitation from us, although in this case it is presented not as a narrative event (i.e. experienced by other subjects in the world of the film) but as a purely cinematic event, aimed at challenging our understanding of what we are viewing.

The animation entails a sound effect, a positioning of the camera and an editing construction. In these last two aspects, moreover, Diop's film reinforces the idea of a liberation through the discourse itself. At the beginning, still in the Musée du Quai Branly, the statue's voice is heard over a black image representing its physical confinement and its limitation to the parameters of the colonial gaze. Once transported to Benin, a POV shot shows the inside of a box that is opened by Beninese anthropologists who initiate a new stage of "awakening" in the life of the object (Image 4). Finally, at nightfall, the voice re-emerges and seems to be liberated by an open door, and the camera then wanders around the Benin museum, showing—and distorting—the natural setting around it, and endowing the static object with a suggested mobility.

The idea of giving the object a voice ties in with Jane Bennett's concept of "thing-power", which is aimed at transcending the anthropocentrism of Western thought centred on the supremacy of the human subject by means of a gaze oriented towards the material agency of objects. For Bennett, one of the objectives of taking the object's perspective is to "dissipate the onto-theological

binaries of life/matter, human/animal, will/determination, and organic/inorganic" (2010: X), a goal that can be aligned with the deconstruction of discourse and form carried out in *Dahomey* on other levels. Bennett suggests that *thing-power* "gestures toward the strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness, constituting the outside of our own experience" (2010: xvi); the voice of the statue, with its own memories and experiences, functions as an animation of an inanimate object, as a historical discourse and as the restitution of a mystical potency that transcends the binaries and rationalism of the Western culture that had assimilated it as an exotic object stripped of power.

The fact that the statue's voice is able to experience history is also important; the statue of King Ghezo, an artefact that has travelled through space and has witnessed the passage of time, is portrayed as a kind of ghost[2] from the past that observes its surroundings but cannot interact directly with them. The eradication of clear boundaries between the binaries of subject-object and past-present is part of the procedure of giving a voice to the statue, which is sometimes positioned in a sort of imaginary physical or verbal interaction with human subjects.

Bliss Cua Lim (2009) suggests that fantastic narratives can constitute sites of resistance by introducing spectral and supernatural elements that contradict the perception of time imposed by modernity. As Lim points out, "imperialist discourse depended on a temporal strategy in which the radical cultural differences brought to light by colonial contact were framed as primitive or anachronistic" (2009: 13). The notion of teleological progress, she argues, "served as a temporal justification for imperialist expansion" (2009: 12) that proposed a "disenchanted" time bound to temporal exclusions "of the primitive, of anachronistic, 'superstitious' folk" (2009: 12).

The replacement of a heterogeneous temporality with a homogeneous one meant that "[w]orlds that contained spirits and other enchanted beings remained untranslatable to colonial discourse and modern time consciousness" (2009: 16). Any kind of supernatural agency is depicted as a threat to the epistemic order and must be reduced or contained within the discourse of primitivism and superstition. For Lin, by allowing the emergence and persistence of the supernatural, and of ghosts whose appearance breaks with the order of calendar time, the fantastic can facilitate a critique of colonial temporalities and reductions, a resistance against the domestication and homogenisation of the Other. In relation to this idea of the Other as a colonialist construct, it is interesting to consider Oyèrónké Oyèwùmi's gendered reading of the Other as a "residual and unspecified category" used by the colonialist apparatus to refer to African women, who are the bottom rung on the human ladder, below European men and women and African men (2017: 209).

THE BLACK WOMAN'S BODY: *SAINT OMER* (ALICE DIOP, 2022)

Language is also a key element in *Saint Omer* (Alice Diop, 2022). This film requires the spectator to listen carefully to the defendant, Laurence Coly, a woman of African descent who provides the opportunity for Diop to trace the neo-colonial forms existing in French society. Indeed, the filmmaker's identification with her two protagonists reflects her own dual identity, which is why it is inevitable for her to focus on the "Black body" (Diop, 2022). In the body of a Black woman put on trial for the crime she committed but also for her appearance, Diop proposes a reading of her film from a perspective that evokes the work of Marguerite Duras. At the beginning of the film, Rama, the director's alter ego, reads a line from Duras's *Hiroshima mon amour* that asserts that the author "uses the power of her narrative to sublimate reality."

Saint Omer fictionalises a true story and constructs a courtroom drama that breaks with the codes of a genre whose structure is based on a country's democratic values and principles: "A trial is a closed narrative unit with a set-up (exposition), a confrontation (investigation) and a resolution (verdict), in which the character arcs are simply drawn and the moral or political parable is almost inevitable" (Vallín, 2023: 328). However, *Saint Omer* eschews all these conventions and their recurring visual motifs: we learn nothing about the prosecution, defence counsel or judges participating in the case; neither the verdict nor the reaction to it will not be presented; and the mise-en-scène eschews all the usual depictions of the courtroom drama too.

The film is based on the case of Fabienne Kabou, a woman of Senegalese origin who in 2013 abandoned her baby on a beach in a French town before the tide came in. Diop, fascinated by this woman, attended the trial as a public observer. Unable to turn it into a documentary (her usual language), Diop fictionalised the whole experience, turning Fabienne into Laurence Coly and herself into Rama, an academic and writer expecting her first child. The crime provided an opportunity to explore colonialist issues inherent in the case that had gone unnoticed due to their abject nature. Zina Giannopoulou (2024: n.p.) asks the question: "Can fictional narration turn such crimes into emblems of larger social problems at the cost of attenuating, if not eclipsing, their singularity?" For Giannopoulou, *Saint Omer* forges a "relational Black subjectivity" that creates a "multidirectional narrative out of an array of 'third spaces', which are hybrid areas of ambiguity (e.g. the objectivity/performativity of the law, the courtroom/symbolic father, and the roaring sea/mother) which evoke and renounce the legacies of imperial violence connecting Europe and Africa" (Giannopoulou, 2024: n.p.). What tropes emerge, then, from this encounter between reality and fiction inscribed with the codes of the courtroom drama?

One of the focal points of this genre that constantly appears in *Saint Omer* is the symbiotic relationship between Rama and Laurence. The storyline in films of this kind is often structured around the development of the trial until the verdict is handed down, with the different agents involved in the proceedings serving as characters, while the presentation of the evidence advances the plot. In this film, the evidence is placed in the middle of the courtroom but is not central to the process: a wide shot shows the architecture of the chamber, with three white women presiding as judges, and in front of them, the material evidence of the case displayed under glass, suitably wrapped and labelled. However, what is inside these packages is never shown, nor is their content ever discussed (Image 5), conveying a sense of theatricality, or suggesting a fait accompli.

Image 5. *Saint Omer* (Alice Diop, 2022)

As noted above, orality is one of the pillars of the film. In this regard, Diop also breaks with the narrative action of the courtroom drama by locating the attention on the testimonies, mainly Laurence's, aimed at shedding light on the events. While in the first scenes the defendant's testimony is filmed with long static shots, as the film progresses it is increasingly interspersed with shots of Rama sitting in the gallery. This shot-reverse shot strategy serves to establish connections between the two characters in terms of identity (both are of Senegalese origin) and on an emotional level (in relation to motherhood) (Image 6). A key moment in these connections occurs in the middle of the film, when Laurence is questioned about her severe state of depression after conceiving her daughter, which she alleges was caused by witchcraft, "the only logical explanation"; this has been her main defence since the beginning of the trial, as she claims to be the victim of an evil eye directed at her by her family back in Senegal. In the reverse shot of Rama, her worried and distressed reaction to Laurence's claims becomes increasingly clear, mainly in the deliberate concealment of her pregnancy (the spectator will not be aware of it until the next sequence, and Rama will not share the news of her pregnancy with her partner or family until later). Diop herself has confessed to the magnetic pull she felt in response to the "psychoanalytic and mythical dimension underlying the way she explained her actions" (2023). A bond is established between these two women with supernatural beliefs that form part of their African cultural identity, but those beliefs are dismissed outright in the trial because, as Lim argues, the colonialist discourse has confined the supernatural to the horror and tabloid genres, deriding it as "a state of cultural provincialism" (Lim, 2009: 25). Thus, towards the end of the film, Rama watches Laurence attentively in a POV shot, and Laurence, in the reverse shot, returns her gaze with a complicit smile. "One of Diop's narrative strategies for distancing or 'decolonising' Coly is the use of Rama as Coly's inverted image" (Giannopoulou, 2024: n.p.).

This symbiotic relationship reaches its expressive and symbolic culmination when Rama re-watches the ending to Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Medea* (Image 6). In the dimly lit room, her face is illuminated by the light from her laptop screen, where we see Maria Callas at the moment when her Medea commits infanticide (Image 6). For Balló, this visual motif of the female spectator in front of the screen synthesises an epiphany, "an emotion-

Image 6. *Saint Omer* (Alice Diop, 2022)

al transfer and a revelation" that enters "the terrain of intimate emotion and the confrontation of faces" (2000: 172). A pregnant writer interested in the myth of Medea attends the trial of a woman accused of murdering her baby. Identity and identification blur together in the bond between the two women. As this Medea is of African descent, the original meaning of the myth is displaced by a post-colonial perspective: "In order to highlight the ideological clash between two irreducible cultures, modern 'Medeas' come from sociocultural locations far from the Western context: Africa, Asia and Latin America" (Mimoso-Ruiz in Bournot, 2019: 58). Magdalena Bournot argues that

> "the infanticide, the distinctive feature of the myth, [...] acquires a different meaning through the renewed problematisation of the concept of foreigner or the 'other'. An 'other' who will take on a different origin, colour and social status depending on the country and the moment in which each playwright approaches the myth. An 'other' who speaks, as in the Greek myth, of the clash of two cultures represented in a romantic relationship" (2019: 58).

In this way, the racialised character bears "the sociohistorical condemnation of mixed colours, cultures and blood" (Bournot, 2019: 67).

There is no revenge in the crime in *Saint Omer*, but the colonial and racial question seeps from every pore of this story. "A woman who has killed her baby cannot expect to inspire compassion. I share their horror," Laurence says during the trial. How can the horror of such an act be understood? The serenity of her behaviour and the neutrality of her gestures shape the portrayal of a woman who has accepted her fate, who exhibits none of the wild body language expected of a racialised woman, and who in this way, as Diop herself points out, evades *Négritude*. "The press says she speaks like a sophisticated Frenchwoman," Rama's partner (a white man) remarks to her with a kind of morbid fascination when he asks her what the defendant is like, evoking a discourse that also underscores the European colonialist notion of the African woman as an Other constructed through a twofold process of "racial inferiorization and gender subordination" (Oyèwùmi, 2017: 210). Because Laurence does not seem to fit the stereotypes of African women in France, their way of dressing or speaking or their level of education, she is constantly judged for it, despite having achieved what her family wanted for her. This incongruity reflects the liminal condition of a racialised woman who was raised in a European neo-colonial order and has to survive in it; Laurence, caught between two orders of existence, is a displaced subject living in an environment that was designed for her subjugation and construction as an Other, yet she comes from a place that does not claim her entirely as its own either. This conflict is expressed in her (unfinished) search for a job, focused on a masculinised white European philosophy, and on her assertion "I am Cartesian", which clashes radically with her insistence on witchcraft and the act of maternal brutality she has committed.

This clash reflects what Chela Sandoval calls a "semiotic technology of the oppressed" drawing on Frantz Fanon's idea that "the black soul is a white man's artifact": "in order to determine how, where, and when to construct and insert an identity that will facilitate continued existence of self and/or community" (Sandoval, 2000: 86). Laurence performs an identity that destabilises the colonial categories established to read the Black body, but in doing so she also exposes herself to new forms of judgement. This *technology*, as Sandoval explains, "permitted Fanon to recognize the values, morals, and ideologies of dominant Euro-American cultures—from the 'soul' through language, love, sex, work, violence, or knowledge—as 'artifacts'" (Sandoval, 2000: 86). In this sense, *Saint Omer* posits a form of decolonisation in the body of the Black woman that matches certain imposed ideological artefacts while at the same time deconstructing them by embodying a contemporary Medea who claims witchcraft to avoid punishment for her crime.

CONCLUSIONS

The three films analysed in this article—*Stop Filming Us, but Listen*; *Dahomey* and *Saint Omer*—expose the persistence of a Eurocentric imaginary of African identity responsible for a neo-colonial narrative in both Europe and Africa, in order to point to new sites and forms of resistance. Their visual approach effectively questions these inherited truths and interprets them as a form of epistemological violence perpetrated by the colonists, which needs to be destroyed through the creation of a genuinely post-colonial iconography.

Through formal strategies that range from the use of a documentary register to the evocation of the supernatural and the recreation/dramatisation of real events, these films present *mises en abyme* or hybrid forms that reject the binaries characteristic of colonial representation (civilised/savage, spectator/object, reason/emotion). Despite their differences, all these films recognise the need to deconstruct discourses actively and reflectively, pointing to the power of speaking in different contexts and circumstances. In all cases, either because of the multiplicity of voices or because of the complexity of what they say, the discourse is not presented as something that can be contained, and often the possibility of an explanation is challenged by the ambiguity of reality.

The deconstruction of these narratives results in the mutation of certain visual motifs associated with the colonial narrative—the classroom, the white saviour, debate, the artwork and the trial—and this mutation enacts a reconciliation with their true identity. Thus, the teacher as white saviour is transformed into the embodiment of an educational project between equals with a critical gaze intrinsic to such a process; the artwork is stripped of its primitivism and its economic value to become a speaking object that reconnects with its history; and the trial is dispossessed of its democratic value in order to explore the systemic racism of society through the depiction of a defendant who is also being tried for her status as a Black woman.

The transformative power of these films lies in the displacement of the Other and the enunciation of the Self, inscribed in the identification between filmmaker and protagonists, the corporealisation of the work of art, or a critical reflection on colonial or contemporary cinematic representations, constructing a post-colonial iconography that reinforces their capacity for agency.

NOTES

* This study forms part of the PID2021-126930OB-I00 research project funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation and the FEDER, EU.

[1] All translations of quotes not in English are ours.

[2] One of Mati Diop's previous films, *Atlantics* (Atlantique, 2019), similarly departs from traditional forms by introducing fantastic elements (phantasmagoria and possessions) in a romantic drama whose turning point is the sinking of a boat full of young migrants on its way from Dakar to Spain.

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IN THE PRESENCE OF THE RACIALISED BODY: (POST-)COLONIAL ICONOGRAPHIES IN *DAHOMEY*, *SAINT OMER* AND *STOP FILMING US, BUT LISTEN*

Abstract

This article analyses the aesthetic, discursive and formal strategies employed in *Stop Filming Us, but Listen* (Vivuya and Twahirwa, 2022), *Dahomey* (Mati Diop, 2024) and *Saint Omer* (Alice Diop, 2022) to expose the persistence of colonial imaginaries in the representation of racialised bodies and propose an iconographic renewal as a way of reclaiming their identity and agency. Using a theoretical approach that articulates key concepts such as post-colonialism, epistemological violence and visual motifs, it examines how these films displace the colonial gaze and mobilise a critical iconography that destabilises inherited binaries (civilised/savage, reason/emotion, object/subject). The analysis is organised around the mutation of key visual motifs (the classroom, the work of art, the trial, the spectator, the white saviour) and focuses on the political dimension of these formal shifts. Through abstractions, generic ruptures and hybridisations between documentary, fiction and the fantastic, these films construct sites of enunciation where the racialised self produces meaning, reclaims memory and transforms the material and imaginary conditions of its representation.

Key words

Visual motif; Post-colonial Cinema; Colonial gaze; Racialised body; Documentary Cinema; Hybridisation; Post-colonial Iconography.

Authors

Ana Aitana Fernández Moreno (Alicante, 1980) holds a PhD in Communication by Pompeu Fabra University and she is a professor lecturer at the University of Lleida. She is a member of the research group CINEMA at UPF and of the MUMOVEP research project. Her lines of research are visual motifs, personal memory, autobiographical documentary, and hybridization in film genres. She has published articles in scientific journals such as *L'Atalante*, *Communication and Society* and *Comparative Cinema* and collaborated in the collective books *Breaking Down Joker* (Routledge, 2021), *Los motivos visuales del cine* (Galaxia Gutemberg, 2016), and *El poder en escena* (Galaxia Gutenberg, 2023). Contact: anaaitana.fernandez@udl.cat

ANTE EL CUERPO RACIALIZADO: ICONOGRAFÍAS (POST)COLONIALES EN *DAHOMEY*, *SAINT OMER* Y *STOP FILMING US, BUT LISTEN*

Resumen

Este artículo analiza las estrategias estéticas, discursivas y formales a través de las cuales *Stop filming us, but listen* (Vivuya y Twahirwa, 2022), *Dahomey* (Mati Diop, 2024) y *Saint Omer* (Alice Diop, 2022) confrontan la persistencia de imaginarios coloniales en la representación del cuerpo racializado y proponen una renovación de la iconografía como vía de recuperación de su identidad y agencia. Desde un enfoque teórico que articula conceptos clave como lo postcolonial, la violencia epistemológica o los motivos visuales, se examina cómo estos films desplazan la mirada colonial y movilizan una iconografía crítica que desestabiliza los binarismos heredados –civilizado/salvaje, razón/emoción, objeto/sujeto–. El análisis se organiza en torno a la mutación de motivos visuales clave (el aula, la obra de arte, el juicio, el espectador, el salvador blanco), y se detiene en la inscripción política de esos desplazamientos formales. A través de puestas en abismo, rupturas genéricas e hibridaciones entre lo documental, lo ficcional y lo fantástico, estas películas construyen espacios de enunciación donde el Yo racializado produce sentido, reclama memoria y transforma las condiciones materiales e imaginarias de su representación.

Palabras clave

Motivo Visual; Cine Postcolonial; Mirada colonial; Cuerpo racializado; Cine documental; Hibridación; Iconografía postcolonial

Autoras

Ana Aitana Fernández Moreno (Alicante, 1980) es doctora en Comunicación por la Universitat Pompeu Fabra, profesora lectora en la Universitat de Lleida. Es miembro del grupo de investigación CINEMA en la UPF y forma parte del proyecto de investigación MUMOVEP. Sus líneas de investigación son los motivos visuales, memoria personal, documental contemporáneo y la hibridación en los géneros cinematográficos. Ha publicado artículos en revistas científicas como *L'Atalante*, *Comparative Cinema* y *Communication and Society*, y colaborado en los libros colectivos *Breaking Down Joker* (Routledge, 2021), *Los motivos visuales del cine* (Galaxia Gutemberg, 2016), y *El poder en escena* (Galaxia Gutenberg, 2023). Contacto: anaaitana.fernandez@udl.cat

Brunella Tedesco Barlocco holds a PhD in Communication from Universitat Pompeu Fabra (IPF), and a Master's degree in Contemporary Film and Audiovisual Studies from the same university. She is an associate lecturer at Escuela Superior de Cine y Audiovisual de Cataluña (ESCAC), among other roles. She is also a member of the CINEMA research group at UPF and of the MUMOVEP research project. Her lines of research include visual motifs, multiplicities, nostalgia and memory in fiction cinema. She has published in academic journals such as *Adaptation*, *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* and *Communication and Society*, and has contributed to several collective publications. Contact: brunella.tedesco@escac.es

Brunella Tedesco Barlocco (Montevideo, Uruguay, 1990) es doctora en Comunicación por la Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Máster en Estudios de Cine y Audiovisual Contemporáneos en la misma universidad y profesora asociada en la Escuela Superior de Cine y Audiovisual de Cataluña (ESCAC), entre otras. Es miembro del grupo de investigación CINEMA de la UPF y del proyecto de investigación MUMOVEP. Sus líneas de investigación son los motivos visuales, las multiplicidades, la nostalgia y la memoria en el cine de ficción. Ha publicado en revistas científicas como *Adaptation*, *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* y *Communication and Society*, y ha colaborado en varios libros colectivos. Contacto: brunella.tedesco@escac.es

Article reference

Fernández Moreno, A. A.; Tedesco Barlocco, B. (2026). In the presence of the racialised body: (post-)colonial iconographies in *Dahomey*, *Saint Omer* and *Stop Filming Us, but Listen*. *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, 41, 47-62. https://doi.org/10.63700/1312

Referencia de este artículo

Fernández Moreno, A. A.; Tedesco Barlocco, B. (2026). Ante el cuerpo racializado: iconografías (post)coloniales en *Dahomey*, *Saint Omer* y *Stop filming us, but listen*. *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, 41, 47-62. https://doi.org/10.63700/1312

recibido/received: 30.04.2025 | *aceptado/accepted:* 10.12.2025

Edita / Published by

Licencia / License

ISSN 1885-3730 (print) /2340-6992 (digital) **DL** V-5340-2003 **WEB** www.revistaatalante.com **MAIL** info@revistaatalante.com