

Silent Africa: Narrative, Power, and Invisibility in French Colonial Cinema

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ABSTRACT: This article shows how French colonial cinema, by concealing its civilizing mission or evoking a humanist discourse, contributed to the imaginary of racialized Africa within a hierarchical configuration. Although these productions claim to be educational, they perpetuate a distorted portrait of the continent in which Africa is reduced to an immobile backdrop and Africans to voiceless and inactive roles. Drawing on a documentary content analysis of colonial cinematographic works from the 1920s to the 1960s and semi-structured interviews with sixteen art doctoral students at the Félix Houphouët-Boigny University, this qualitative sophrological communication has an educational perspective. The thematic content analysis, illustrated to the point of saturation, reveals three transversal logics: the dramatization of otherness, the description of the colonial hierarchy, and the actantialization of the subaltern voice. The article aims to promote a manipulated reading of these visual works to foster a racialized historical consciousness.

KEYWORDS: Colonial cinema, otherness, actantialization, manipulated education, hierarchy.

1. INTRODUCTION

Although it has long been perceived as a medium of culture and entertainment, it is argued that French cinema during the colonial era actually played a key role in the production of imperial imaginaries (Corriou, 2022). Whether through narratives fueled by exoticism, the myth of white heroism, or the civilizing mission, the African continent is always represented through various prisms (Bédia, 2015). In these spaces, Africa is represented as archaic, mystical, savage, and infantilized. The colonized, for their part, are relegated to a secondary role, speechless, passive, and lacking true subjectivity. This cultural production therefore contributes to shaping an imaginary based on the essentialization of difference and the racialization of hierarchy. As Amselle (2010) demonstrates, these representations are part of a broader process: the naturalization of the colonized's inferiority. Of course, from speeches and devices justifying that the domination of races, societies and cultures is natural, rational and often beneficial.

Behind this logic of entertainment lies an ideological operation. Cinema thus appears as a "*sharing of the sensible*" that organizes what can be seen, heard, and thought Rancière (2000). It then seems to consolidate a fundamental asymmetry between the colonizer and the colonized, between the historical subject and the observed. This regime rests on its own regulation of validity in which African peoples are relegated to the background, reduced to characters or used decoratively to tell the story in which only Europeans act. The silence of African actors in so many colonial films is the centerpiece of this process of suppression of the subaltern voice (Mbembe, 2000).

From then on, a tension crystallizes between proclaimed values of humanism, modernity and universalism and the concrete practices of representation, which are based on inequality and the object, and result in the deliberate erasure of colonized speech. French colonial cinema, while proclaiming itself "civilizing" or "educational" and "instructive", participates in the production of a profoundly unequal symbolic order which legitimizes domination by ontologically positing the "natural" inferiority of African peoples.

In a didactic approach, the aim is to ask how did French colonial cinema produce this racialized image while mobilizing a humanist and progressive discourse? What was the economy of aesthetic, narrative, and ideological forms that made the stabilization of this falsified regime of visibility possible?

This tension formulates a central question: How did French colonial cinema create such an image and construct its tautologically racist and political legitimacy, while seeking the alibi of a form of humanist and progressive discourse?

What is the economy of aesthetic, narrative, and ideological means that conditions this regime of distorted visibility?

Why do these representations (massively reactivated, taken up, extended, or distanced and criticized by post-colonial artistic production) continue to organize this contemporary imagination related to Africa?

By adopting a didactic approach to the regimes of visibility and enunciation implemented by colonial cinema, this study proposes to think not only as an object of historical or aesthetic study, but as a didactic tool to be questioned in the formation of critical thought, emancipated from the visual legacies of domination.

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The following texts are reviewed to answer questions such as those formulated above. They draw on multidisciplinary theoretical and critical analyses, relating to diverse and varied sources, to explore what has been said and thought in terms of colonial visibility devices, the logic of aesthetic or political representation, and forms of post-colonial reappropriation or protest.

From this perspective, French visual production, both colonial and postcolonial, offers particularly rich material for rethinking both historical and inherited forms of politicization of sight. Literature on French colonial cinema has, in particular, highlighted the construction of a rather singular visual imaginary against a backdrop of political, racial, and aesthetic domination. From the 1950s onward, cinema was seen as a support for colonial domination by producing what Stam and Shohat (1994) call hierarchical and exoticized fictions. But far from being simple documents, these tools resemble a naturalization of colonial domination. Mirzoeff (2011) calls this aesthetic the visualities of domination. He argues, on the contrary, that silence about the colonized and the settlers is not neutral and determines a hierarchy of the gaze. Similarly, “humanist” or educational productions most often perpetuate this visibility. After independence, they did not disappear but continued, transformed or were criticized in other postcolonial productions. (Mbembe, 2001; Vergès, 2005). Finally, several authors also insist on the need to include a critical and didactic reading of these productions, beyond historical or aesthetic documentation, through these productions for an education in the image; deconstruction of visibility regimes, interrogation of ideological mechanisms and emancipation of this tool of knowledge (Cham, 1996; Kurtz 2019; Mirzoeff, 2011).

2. METHODOLOGY

Anchored in a qualitative approach with a didactic aim, this study aims to identify the influence of representations inherited from French colonial cinema on the ways of transmitting knowledge, particularly in the fields of history, literature and media education. It articulates two complementary methodological devices.

First, documentary research was conducted using a corpus of colonial films produced between 1920 and 1960. This documentary research made it possible to historically contextualize the works, identify their discursive logic, and question their potential or actual uses in a learning context. Second, sixteen doctoral students in performing arts at the Université Félix Houphouët-Boigny were interviewed during individual semi-structured interviews. Spanning time, informed by open questions and attentive listening, these interviews focused on their perceptions of the educational or pedagogical functions of colonial cinema, their modes of critical reading of figures of racial otherness, and the relationships between teaching knowledge and memory. These doctoral students, selected for their ability to analyze audiovisual forms and understand the issues of cultural transmission, were surveyed until the content saturation stage, according to Bardin's (2007) content theory model and Glaser and Strauss's (1967) grounded theory. The interview data were analyzed in this way to identify three structuring axes of reading in the critical reception of the works: the dramatization of racial otherness, the staging of the colonial hierarchy and the invisibility of the subaltern voice. This method allows the study to work on the conditions of a critical and distanced openness in school, capable of questioning inherited imaginaries and promoting the historical and civic awareness of learners.

3. RESULTS

The analysis of the interviews conducted previously reveals two main axes of structuring of the reception of colonial films by the doctoral students interviewed. The development by the latter of an acute awareness of the processes of racialization and visual hierarchization at work in colonial productions, including in clothing, and the expression of a certain critical vigilance with regard to the didactic risks of an unmediated use of the cinema medium for teaching, thus implying pedagogical supervision and mediation of images.

3.1. A keen awareness of the processes of racialization and visual hierarchization

The doctoral students interviewed, for their part, demonstrate a keen and detached reading of the aesthetic mechanisms of colonial cinematic representation. They inscribe the images within aesthetic devices that produce a mute, frozen, and subaltern Africa. Through sustained attention to the *mise-en-scène*, the analysis of narrative choices, and visual objectification devices, they detect the hierarchization that consists not only of the existence of a colonial narrative through the gaze, but also as a distanced, exotic, and inferiorized norm. Two broad categories emerge. First, there are those works that claim a radical functioning: Africa as a backdrop without subjectivity. Second, there are those that enclose Africa in an immobile temporality, allowing the justification of a golden age necessary for imperialist ideology.

. 3.1.1. Africa as a frozen and silent setting in colonial films

From this perspective, the art PhD students interviewed have a realistic and critical perspective on the use of visual devices in French colonial films. According to their criticism, the films do not represent Africa or its true history and perceived social life. Rather, they present the continent as an image reminiscent of a foreign scene or place, intended to support and highlight the adventure of the heroic white man. In this way, Africa remains for them an immobile space, impenetrable in time and space, without evolution, voice, or subjectivity. This seems to be confirmed by the PhD students' opinion that there is no movement or evolution of Africa or Africans in the films, as this excerpt from an interview with a PhD student clarifies:

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"Most of these films only show the African being there. He's there, but he has nothing to do or anything to say. He's just a silhouette that figures in the films. He's just there to provide the backdrop. It's just to accompany the white man in his colonizing adventure." (HR, PhD student, Performing Arts).

This point of view describes the unease of depoliticization of Africa that this aesthetic arouses. An Africa, certainly, presented but silent whose goal is to stage the image of a continent that Europe has decided to civilize. The language is often ironic or disillusioned, as if to demonstrate that this device, as crude as it is effective, cannot function without an unequal economy of the gaze, as we can read in the following interview excerpt:

"I'm often struck by the place of the African in old films. He never receives a look. He doesn't allow us to enter the story. He always remains on the periphery of everything; he remains in a corner of the image from which we can ignore him. He doesn't speak, he doesn't say anything. It's the others who talk about him." (FT, PhD student, Performing Arts).

Through this discourse, we perceive in an analytical and sensitive way, in the collective imagination of the doctoral students interviewed, a critical reading of the regime of visibility imposed on the African character in French colonial cinema. Cognitive tableaux forming an idea of Africa never receiving a gaze, always remaining on the periphery of everything. According to them, whether from the front, the back, or the profile in a film of this context, the African is always off-center, always elsewhere in relation to the center. Points of view that denounce a strategy of symbolic erasure: the colonized is fundamentally without a center, literally excluded or pushed to the margins of the frame and notably deprived of any autonomous narrative function.

Furthermore, as formulated, the speech attests to a good understanding of film codes: the doctoral students implicitly mobilize the notion of framing, but also that of point of view, focalization, narrative voice to show that the viewer's gaze is always located at the center, always oriented from the place of the colonizer. The colonized therefore has no narrative reality of his own, he only lives in the stories that others, in this case Europeans, make of him. He is neither the speaker of the statement, nor an actor, nor the bearer of memory.

But this silence and erasure in film writing do not relegate the colonized subject to a simple withdrawal from discourse. They appear here to be part of a more general system, which freezes the entire African space in a posture of immobility, timelessness, even spectrality, thus contributing to freezing otherness in a posture of fixity and inability to change. Through this aesthetic posture, colonial cinema does not simply reduce the filmed subject to silence. It condemns the latter to a posture of untouchability, of freezing, conducive to exoticization for the Western gaze, as the next section translates.

3.1.2. An aesthetic of exoticism and temporal fixity in colonial films

This sub-axis allows us to qualify a recurring practice of colonial cinema: that of representing Africa not as a historical reality in progress, but as a vast exotic and timeless setting. Indeed, the doctoral students' comments in this analysis sequence reveal a precise, sharp and resolutely critical reading of the aesthetic and ideological work of colonial cinema. Through what they call an aesthetic of exoticism and temporal fixation, the films screened offer a timeless and naturalized Africa, stripped of historical processes, reduced to picturesque and folkloristic imagery. It is therefore not a faithful or complex representation of real Africa, but a visual artifact, intended to comfort European viewers in a stereotypical, hierarchical and reassuring vision of the colonial world. This is what can be noted in the following interview excerpt:

"Frankly, as soon as you see these films, it looks like Africa, it's like an old set that never comes to life, something that was put there so that the white man would look like a hero. The characters don't change, it seems lifeless and sterile. They would have put the whole world on pause so that the white man would seem modern and engaging." (HR, PhD student, Performing Arts).

Indeed, the doctoral students interviewed distinguish the visual framework. Africa is not presented as a historical, social, or political space, but rather as a fossilized one, combined with a showcase of frozen and, above all, instrumentalized exoticism, museum-like due to two implementations: on the one hand, the disconnection from the history of African societies, and on the other, the pursuit of the eternal past without development and discontinuity.

Thus, in their discourses, the doctoral students implicitly reveal a fully articulated awareness of the processes of racialization and visual hierarchization specific to colonial cinema. From Africa reduced to the status of a silent and secondary setting to the frozen aestheticization that fossilizes African cultures in an archaic past, the students' critical discourses reveal how the images, under the pretext of "exoticism," are part of a symbolic autobiography of the human and dehumanizing colonized. In other words, the analyzed discourses do not simply describe the films: they decode them as power devices, where the frame, the silence, and the aestheticization of otherness legitimize colonial power. The doctoral students, in fact, provide a perfectly informed description of the power devices inherent in colonial images.

3.2. The didactic risks of an uncritical use of colonial films

A risk inherent in the academic use of colonial cinema is, in particular, the unconscious reactivation of stereotypes that prevail when entering the field of colonial audiovisual works and productions. In the absence of critical support, there is a great danger that each work viewed will reinforce imaginaries of domination and passivity in students. The teacher is therefore essential, not as a simple projectionist, but as a mediator of meaning, who guides the analysis of the images and encourages a critical, contextualized and formative reading of the imaginaries they carry.

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3.2.1. Colonial films as a danger of unconscious reactivation of stereotypes

The concerns of the doctoral students interviewed are well-founded when they note the unsupervised use of colonial cinema in educational contexts. In the absence of a critical and historical presentation of the film and its analytical accompaniment, projected "all alone, jaws open to nostalgia," these works risk reactivating deeply rooted stereotypes. Indeed, in an institutional setting, the power of images lies notably in their capacity to impose themselves silently, insidiously, and lastingly, because the authorities that are derived images rarely provoke rejection from viewers. Images have the ability to naturalize hierarchies, to make "normal" relationships of domination, because they speak without speaking, show without explanation, suggest without demonstration.

"It would be harmful to show this type of film without contextualization, because we risk simply conveying old clichés and not realizing it. Images can do much more than words, especially for young people who generally lack critical perspective. When I was in first year, the teacher showed us a colonial film, and honestly, if she didn't explain it, I would certainly have believed that it was the real Africa of the past." (KG, PhD student, Performing Arts).

This testimony directly refers to a major pedagogical tension: the risk that ideological fictions will ultimately be taken for historical truths in themselves. In this sense, the doctoral student here evokes his own experience as a student spectator to highlight how often the film image can substitute for historical memory, especially if it is not questioned. When he states "images can do more than words," he understands the power of a visual imagination that does not need to be analyzed like explicit discourse, because the image "acts" before the critical spirit and judgment, through emotion and aesthetic seduction.

"If you leave the student alone with this, they may mistake these representations for truths. They need to be deconstructed with tools. Just because it's in black and white doesn't mean it's neutral. The music, the framing, everything is calculated to make you believe in a certain Africa. The teacher needs to sort it out. Otherwise, they'll say that cinema is equivalent to reality." (NO PhD Student, Performing Arts).

In reviewing this discourse, the doctoral students interviewed take a critical stance toward the unsupervised use of colonial cinema in the educational space. Thus, for students, watching films without working on the discourse risks reactivating ideological representations. In other words, the cinematographic work is not a simple framework but an ideological message in itself, all the more subtle and powerful as it takes the form of art. In this vein, they emphasize that each formal element—the music, the lighting, the framing—contributes to constructing Africa, a fixed, mute, and subordinate Africa. This means that the work of learning mediology falls to the teacher, and that the latter must provide them with the necessary tools to analyze a discourse of the image. Without this mediology, the current risk would emerge that cinema and reality are confused, like critical memory and symbolic reproduction.

3.2.2. The teacher as a mediator of meaning and guarantor of critical perspective in the didactic transmission of colonial films

The doctoral students emphasize the need for teachers to play a decisive role in the reception of the evocative images of colonial power conveyed by the corpora. It is not enough to confuse their availability with serving the cause of citizenship education: without the appropriation of these works, image education will fail in its own. It is clear that teachers are mediators of meaning, critical transmitters, and trap-finders: in other words, they must accompany their target audience in the deconstruction of representations. This task requires both an explanation of the historical context and attention to the filmic processes, framing, sound, silence, and symbols that allow us to uncover the ideology hidden beneath the apparent neutrality of the images.

"The teacher must not just show the film, he must really equip the students, give them the tools to understand, question and deconstruct what they see. Otherwise, it is the images themselves that teach in their place, with all the biases and stereotypes that they can convey without anyone questioning them." (KP, PhD student, Performing Arts).

This statement highlights the need for ongoing critical support. The image, if left unsupervised, becomes a vehicle for ideological transmission. This is why, other doctoral students add:

"We cannot look at these films as simple historical documents. They are instruments of power; we must examine them step by step, as we would a political text." (HD, PhD student, Performing Arts).

Thus, for participants, teaching with colonial cinema is not about teaching this knowledge about images, but about ways of approaching images. This is in itself an act of training, not of awareness-raising: it is about giving students the lenses to know how to distinguish between relations of domination, silences made of content, and montages in every sense of the term. Cinema is not a medium in this practice: it becomes a pedagogical tool rich in critical contributions as long as the teacher assumes the commitment to it as an integrated critical compass. Ultimately, thus, education in images becomes an education in citizenship by demanding a political and historical meaning of the narratives that shape learners' perceptions of the past.

4. DISCUSSION

The survey results reveal a marked critical awareness among the doctoral students interviewed, who acutely articulate aesthetics and politics in their reading of colonial cinema. Two major axes emerge from their remarks: an analysis of the visual mechanisms

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of racialization and hierarchization, on the one hand; and an examination of the pedagogical issues linked to the academic use of these films, on the other.

The analysis of colonial cinema carried out by the doctoral students echoes the work of Mbembe (2013), for whom the colonial imagination is based on a visual *necropolitics*, where the colonized subject is denied in its vitality, its subjectivity and its historicity. Africa is often represented as a "living museum" (cf. Mudimbe, *L'Invention de l'Afrique*, 1988), where otherness is frozen in an archaic space-time, designed to better promote the supposed modernity of the colonizer.

This visualization participates in what Hall (1997) calls the *naturalization of cultural differences*, a process by which representations make invisible the mechanisms of ideological construction. Cinema then becomes a device for producing a hierarchical *symbolic order*, as described by Said (1978) in *Orientalism*, where the Other exists only as an exoticized reflection of the dominating Same. By identifying processes of framing, silencing, focusing, or freezing time, doctoral students demonstrate their ability to deconstruct what Rancière (2000) calls the *partition of the sensible*: an aesthetic regime that organizes what can be seen, said, and heard, and, in this case, what is denied to the colonized.

The second axis, just as fundamental, questions the didactic uses of colonial cinema in schools. The doctoral students here recall the need for a critical framework for viewing. Their approach echoes the contributions of Freire (1970) and his *pedagogy of the oppressed*, according to which education cannot be limited to a vertical transmission of knowledge, but must be a process of awareness-raising and deconstruction of relations of domination.

The image, as Barthes notes in *The Photographic Message* (1961), is never neutral. It contains implicit *cultural codes that need to be interpreted and problematized*. This is why doctoral students emphasize the role of the teacher as a mediator of meaning—a role also defended by Delporte (2007) in his work on the critical analysis of images in educational contexts.

Similarly, the concept of *critical visual literacy* developed by Kellner (2004) in *Media Culture* is particularly relevant: it invites students to be trained in the active reading of media productions, by equipping them to question underlying ideologies, reproduced stereotypes and narrative strategies.

From this perspective, doctoral students do not see cinema as a simple educational medium, but as a political and epistemological tool. By mobilizing it critically, it becomes a lever for decolonizing the imagination and for intellectual emancipation (Spivak, 1988; hooks, 1994).

5. CONCLUSION

Analysis of the doctoral students' discourses revealed a reflexive and critical stance toward the representations transmitted by colonial cinema. These future researchers, from the performing arts and humanities, are not content with a passive reading of the images they receive: they decipher the ideological mechanisms, the aesthetic processes of racialization, and the logic of visual hierarchization. Two major issues emerge from their remarks. The first concerns the freezing of a silent, frozen, folklorized Africa by colonial cinema, a representation that served to conceal colonialism and all the violence it engendered, including slavery. The second issue concerns the catastrophic pedagogical consequences of the uncritical use of these cinematographic productions in the classroom: without support, they only reinforce stereotypes and legitimize dominant narratives erected as untouchable historical truths. Faced with these aspirations, the doctoral students then evoke the role of the teacher as a mediator of meaning. Cinema becomes a tool, an educational vehicle with potentially immense power, provided it is approached for what it is: an artifact, a series of aesthetic and ideological choices requiring careful deciphering. Far from condemning these films, they call for their use in the service of image education and informed citizenship. The gaze on the past then becomes a lever for understanding the present and creating the future.

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