

The (neo)colonial medium is the message

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation, which is of an exploratory nature, raises the issue of colonial filmic representations living on today, and investigates the role of documentary films on the Belgian Congo produced by Belgians in forestalling a substantive postcolonial debate. By examining several Belgian colonial films through a postcolonial lens, I have disclosed how the representations they hold served several purposes. For instance, they were a clear manifestation of colonial discourse, as such safeguarding the Self/Other (Belgian colonialist/Congolese colonised) dichotomy. Furthermore, by emphasising the superiority of the Self and the primitivity of the Other, these films tried to legitimise the colonial project. The primitivity of the Other is encoded in explicit and implicit representations of animality, inferior intelligence, etc. Considering the insults contemporary Congo-Belgians endure, I suggest that many of these representations have survived colonialism. Moreover, I argue that the depiction of the Belgian Congo as a 'model-colony' in colonial film, has influenced the felt need to engage in a substantive debate. Lastly, with the insights of audience theory and several critical examinations of empire cinema in mind, I suggest that (colonial) film, and audio-visual media in general, have the capacity to influence popular views. What is more, the institutions that control them have an important impact on what information reaches the public at large, considering the daily consumption of these media. To ensure the provision of a complete picture of Belgium's colonial past and its lingering consequences, media channels such as VRT need to be mindful of the representations they produce and display and need to seriously engage in the 'decolonisation' of their institutions.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	3
Abstract	4
Problem Statement	7
Research	8
a) Exploratory study	8
b) Research purpose	8
c) Research question	9
Methodology	9
a) Data	9
b) Data selection	10
c) Method.....	11
Literature Review	13
Postcolonial Cinema Studies	15
Film Studies.....	16
Continental Film Theory – Structuralism – Post-structuralism.....	16
Cinema and Race	17
Proto- or quasi-Postcolonial Filmmaking Projects.....	18
Postcolonial Theory	19
Postcolonial Theory?	19
Frantz Fanon.....	20
Edward Saïd – The West and the Rest.....	21
Colonial Discourse.....	22
<i>Theories of colonial discourse</i>	22
<i>Stereotypes and ‘racial fetishism’</i>	23
The Production and Instrumentalization of Meanings	24
The Impact of Film.....	25
Audience Theory	25
Empire Cinema	27
Assessment.....	29
Analysis	30
CINEMATEK.....	30
Belgian Colonial Filmmaking.....	32
Historical Overview.....	32
<i>Ernest Genval</i>	33
<i>Gérard De Boe</i>	34
Themes Across the Reels	37
<i>The ‘black physique’ and bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence</i>	37
<i>A successful civilising story?</i>	42
1. <i>Filling in the “gap”</i>	42
2. <i>Health</i>	44
3. <i>Education, housing and infrastructure</i>	50
<i>Change in geopolitical interests and attitudes</i>	53
Discussion	56
<i>Kinderen van de Kolonie (Children of the Colony)</i>	57
Sarah De Bisschop – VRT	57

Behind the Scenes	58
Alternative Truths.....	61
Discussion	62
Conclusion.....	64
Reflection	66
References.....	68

Problem Statement

My mother was visiting some friends. One of those friends is a historian. When they asked her what I was analysing for my master's dissertation and my mother explained, they did not understand. Moreover, the historian questioned the relevance of my work because: 'okay, but we don't have anything to do with that, right?'

The subject my mother was trying to elaborate upon was the Belgian Congo and the lingering consequences for (descendants of) its residents. Although I was already aware of this truth, this reminiscence made it even more clear to me that the modal Belgian, and even the highly educated one, has no real perception of what happened during the Belgian colonisation of Congo (1908-1960), and certainly not of its enduring consequences. The Belgian public stance towards the former colony was, at least up until a few years ago, not very critical or even non-existent. In most minds, including mine, the concept of 'decolonisation' was nothing more than the process of formal independence, with the latter having a sort of space-clearing effect in the mind. However, the consequences of our colonial past are vast and persistent. Not only the Democratic Republic of Congo and its citizens still experience lingering effects of colonisation (cf. socio-economic effects of neo-colonialism), but Belgian citizens of Congolese descent are confronted with blatant and institutional racism daily (Koning Boudewijnstichting [KBS], 2017).

There is still no substantive public debate about the postcolonial subject in Belgium. It is clear that the Belgian postcolonial memory is more singular and less critical than that of some of our neighbouring countries (Goddeeris, 2015). According to Isebald Goddeeris, the dominant narrative is one that perceives the Belgian colonisation of Congo as one of paternalism and idealism. Racism, subjugation, and exploitation for own material gain are usually not, or very fleetingly, affiliated with the Belgian colonisation in this discourse (Goddeeris, 2019). This is not so surprising considering the Belgian government steered and restricted the accessible information about the Belgian Congo at least until 1960 (Doom, 2013), among other devices, through film. Around the turn of the century, this discourse did start to be questioned and criticised. However, in the context of the 50th anniversary of Congolese independence in 2010, the dominant narrative as described by Goddeeris - of which David Van Reybrouck's *Congo. Een geschiedenis* (2010) can be viewed as an embodiment - took over again as more attention was paid to the white, Belgian perspective on or memory of the Belgian Congo. At the end of 2018 – in the summer of which youths still chanted "chopping off hands, the Congo is ours!" at a festival in Limburg -, the debate on and consciousness about Belgium's colonial past seemed to take a turn for the better. According to Gert Huskens, the VRT-series *Kinderen van de Kolonie*, in which Congolese witnesses were heard, and the re-opening of the Royal Africa Museum in Tervuren in December that year, generated a tipping point in the Flemish approach to our colonial past (Huskens, 2018). Last academic year (2018-2019) I myself felt that change in the context of my education, as we visited the newly opened museum and were encouraged to follow debates and lectures on 'decolonisation', which were abundant at the time. By following several of these debates, I was confronted with (part of) the *Congolese diaspora's* perspectives on the issue for the first time, instead of hearing about it through white

(predominantly male) professors. Nevertheless, it is striking that no such encouragements were made *this* academic year (at least not to me). This begs the question whether there simply were no debates or lectures on ‘decolonisation’ to follow, or if our former colony was merely not on the academic calendar. Either way, this seems to indicate a rather fleeting attention for a topic that was only last year a “hot” one. I therefore argue that the scales may have started to tip in favour of greater awareness in 2018-2019, but that it will turn back into a collective blind spot if Congo is no longer part of the picture. The media play an important role in determining what that picture looks like and consequently have a certain responsibility. The institutions that control them have the capacity to provide the viewer with an alternative, and more complete representation of Belgium’s colonial past and lingering consequences than those offered by colonial cinema and by the narrative that has been dominant for decades. Moreover, Congolese and Congo-Belgians should be more involved in determining the picture, because they are, for an essential part, the subject of that picture. *Kinderen van de Kolonie* was indeed an attempt to give Congolese and Congo-Belgians a voice, but the problem is of a structural nature and cannot be ameliorated by singular schemes.

Research

a) Exploratory study

This dissertation entails a study of an exploratory nature, and it is as such not my objective to answer or solve a concrete research question. It is clear that the moving image (television and cinema) has become a dominant medium over the past century and has an impact on our perception of the world and the people in it. With the power of the moving image in mind, and especially of the representations in it, I aim to explore the relevance of representations in Belgian documentary films on the Belgian Congo to the perception and consequent treatment of citizens of Congolese descent in Belgium. Furthermore, I will consider the organisations and institutes providing such documentary films, so as to explore their contribution to the overall (critical) public awareness around the former colony and its lingering consequences.

b) Research purpose

The purpose of this exploratory study is twofold. First, I want to initiate further research into the Belgium’s collective postcolonial memory and the influence of the media therein. *How much does the average Belgian know about our colonial past, the (power) relations it created, and the effect it still has on Belgian citizens of Congolese, or even African, descent? Does the average Belgian ever think about our former colony and feel some kind of responsibility? Does Belgium, just like the Netherlands, suffer from ‘white innocence’? Moreover, what is the role of the media in our collective postcolonial memory? What have news reels about the DRC looked*

like since formal independence up till now? Does media reporting and omission influence if and how we thought and continue to think about our former colony? These are all questions that I believe are extremely relevant to gain a better insight in the potential capacity of the media to shape popular views on historical and contemporary events in which Belgium was/is involved. Moreover, I believe that asking the right questions (for example through widespread surveys) can create greater awareness of our colonial past and the severe consequences it had and continues to have for Congo-Belgians, as well as for citizens of the DRC.

Second, and this alludes more to the societal significance of this dissertation, I believe it is important to keep the limelight on this very relevant issue. As I have mentioned above, the period 2018-2019 was a period wherein the narrative seemed to change for the better and concepts such as ‘decolonisation of the mind’ were all around. However, I want to emphasise that ‘decolonisation of the mind’ does not happen overnight, and that a singular critical series (*Kinderen van de Kolonie*) and the, in my opinion inadequate, renovation of the Royal Africa Museum means that we are now a ‘decolonised’ society. There is still a lot more work to be done, and for this to happen, Congo¹ needs to remain part of the picture. Moreover, Belgian scholarship herein is not vast and is mainly written in French or Dutch, making the broader impact of these works and the potential for comparative (European) studies modest.

c) Research question

Research question: How do documentary films on the Belgian Congo produced by Belgians reinforce the persistent prejudice towards Belgian citizens of Congolese descent and forestall a substantive postcolonial debate in Belgium?

Methodology

a) Data

To discuss the problem area under consideration, I have studied three sets of data using a different method for each set. The first dataset consists of Belgian colonial (propaganda) films included in a DVD-box provided by Cinematek, called *Belgisch Congo Belge* (2010). The second dataset consists of the booklet of information that accompanies the colonial films included in the DVD-box. The third dataset under examination is the 2018-2019 series *Kinderen van de Kolonie*².

¹ The events in the context of Belgian colonisation, and its consequences for Congo-Belgians and the DRC.

² The first episode of which also deals with the Congo Free State. The bulk of the series, however, focuses on the period of the Belgian Congo and its aftermath.

I have used a postcolonial lens to look at the colonial films, and as such have engaged in a postcolonial cinema study (see later). This dissertation does not only contain a comment on the construction and representation of the 'Other' through colonial film but also highlights the ways colonial cinema tried to legitimise the colonial project. Moreover, it focusses, albeit to a lesser extent, on the representations of the 'Self' in these colonial films and on the, often literal, whiteness that infuses them. Furthermore, I have investigated the structures and motivations behind the production and distribution of both the original colonial films and the DVD-box that contains them, and of *Kinderen van de Kolonie*. In other words, I have tried to find out whether this whiteness *on* screen can also be found *off* of it.

b) Data selection

The Cinematek DVD-box contains fifteen films, ten of which were produced by Gérard De Boe, four by Ernest Genval, and one by André Cauvin.

The ten short-to-mid length films of Gérard De Boe are:

- *Leprosy* (09'24") 1938;
- *The Black Elite of Tomorrow* (16'16") 1950;
- *Wagenia Fishermen* (13'34") 1952;
- *Mangbetu* (30'10") 1954;
- *Lovanium* (08'17") 1959;
- *Training Medical Staff* (10'05") 1955;
- *In the Garden of Brother Gillet* (09'02") 1957;
- *Congolese Sisters* (09'17") 1958;
- *In 50 years* (20'35") 1958;
- *She Shall Be Called Woman* (11'39") 1953.

The four short-to-mid length films of Ernest Genval are:

- *From Boma to Tshela* (28'39") 1926;
- *Gold* (15'23") 1938;
- *Within the Work Fair* (05'06") 1926;
- *The Life of the Waterman* (12'45") 1938.

The full-length film of André Cauvin included in the DVD-box is *Bwana Kitoko* (77') 1955.

For the part of this dissertation that focuses on Belgian colonial cinema, I decided to concentrate exclusively on this DVD-box for two reasons. The first rationale is practical. Considering the objective of this dissertation, it would have been an unnecessary additional cost to dig into the archives myself. This would have made it impossible for me to conduct

research on *Kinderen van de Kolonie*, considering the timespan of this project. Secondly, the focus on a DVD-box (accompanied by an informative booklet) distributed by a certain institution, added an interesting dimension. I could now examine and question the editorial choices made, not only in the selection of films, but also in the type of information the booklet provides.

As the scope of this dissertation does not allow me to discuss all fifteen films in detail, I have selected a few - based on the relevance for a certain theme or the presence of a remarkable and noteworthy scene - which are examined thoroughly. Apart from the selected few, the other films are considered in a more general manner. Furthermore, I have excluded *She Shall Be Called Woman* (De Boe, 1953) because this film does not contain any images of (life in) the Belgian Congo and is as such not relevant for this dissertation. Moreover, after careful consideration, I have excluded a discussion of André Cauvin and his *Bwana Kitoko* (1955). The reason for this exclusion is the fact that the film was already criticised immensely when it was first released, and one can also find an extensive discussion of the film and its creator by Mathieu Zana Aziza Etambala in *Patrimoine d'Afrique Centrale* (Van Schuylenbergh & Etambala, 2010). Also, the way of representing and narrating in *Bwana Kitoko* can, in my opinion, be considered similar to and, to a certain extent, a culmination of representation styles by Gérard De Boe.

c) Method

With regard to the colonial films under consideration, I have applied the method proposed by Van Schuylenbergh and Etambala in *Patrimoine d'Afrique Centrale. Archives Films. Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, 1912-1960* (Van Schuylenbergh & Etambala, 2010). The presented method is suggested as a way for historians to analyse the moving image, to use it as a source. Even though I am not a historian and the objective of this dissertation is not recapitulating in nature, the proposed methodology has proved to be highly relevant for my work.

According to the authors, to interpret and use the moving image correctly, one has to unveil the main themes that repeat themselves throughout the reels. In the case of Belgian colonisation in Central Africa, there are certain integrating themes which not only allow a synthesis of the images and their content, but also highlight the ideology and concerns of the directors/filmmakers (e.g. theme: the three pillars of Belgian colonisation).

The authors point out two ways to analyse colonial film: 1) institutional analysis; and 2) discourse analysis. The first way is the least challenging, as this information is well-documented throughout different sources. The second way is more demanding, but, according to the authors, somewhat more interesting. The goal of the latter is to identify the processes used to construct a narration which is coherent and mindful of historical plausibility, produce pleasing and instructive entertainment, and create a film that possibly possesses an

unacknowledged cultural will (Van Shuylenbergh & Etambala, 2010). This dissertation applies a mixed method in the sense that both a discourse analysis and an institutional analysis are employed.

Firstly, the institution that provided the DVD-box and the accompanying booklet in 2010, Cinematek, is under examination. To get some insight in the editorial choices, I corresponded with editor in chief Erik Martens via email. Secondly, the filmmakers and institutions behind the original footage included in the DVD-box (and the impact they had on one another) are situated in time by making use of secondary sources [institutional].

As to the actual footage incorporated into the DVD-box, I have carried out a transcription that is loosely based on *as-produced script transcriptions*³ (Line21 CC, 2020). This way, it was easier to recover, for example, a certain moment when the narrator made a noteworthy statement or when a strategic scene-cut was made. Aided by this transcription, I identified several broad themes, which are present throughout the reels. Simultaneously, I uncovered and discussed the discourse which manifests through the imaging and narration, and which strives to present and legitimate a particular model of reality, by using a postcolonial angle (*postcolonial cinema historiography*⁴). Two out of the three units present in film⁵, the narration (1), and the image (2), which communicate with one another and make up the discourse, are addressed and discussed [discourse]. As the authors suggest, I have considered how the narration, which transfers an explicit hold (“anorage”; anchorage), interacts with the image (Van Schuylenbergh & Etambala, 2010).

With regard to *Kinderen van de Kolonie*, I limited myself to analysing the institutions and structures involved in production, as well as the rationale behind the series. I collected the necessary data through a semi-structured interview with the director of the series, Sarah De Bisschop. Initially, I was to meet up with her and editor in chief Geert Clerbout at the editorial office of the VRT in Brussels. Unfortunately, the current COVID-19 crisis did not allow me to do so. Consequently, the interview was conducted via Skype and solely with Ms. De Bisschop. After asking her consent, the interview was recorded. Subsequently, I carried out a *verbatim transcription*⁶ (Corners, 2015), after which I performed open coding based on three broad questions.

³ An as-produced script transcription is an exact reflection of the final film. It includes act breaks, scene breakdowns and descriptions, continuity as required, plus word-accurate dialogue and IDs. The transcription I have carried out for this dissertation is somewhat less detailed: it does include word-accurate “dialogue” and descriptions of the scenes. However, a limited number of irrelevant scenes and narrations were left out, and I did not work with speaker IDs as the narrator is the only speaker.

⁴ Ponzanesi and Waller (2012).

⁵ A discussion of the accompanying music was left out for practical reasons; mostly because of the scope of this dissertation.

⁶ A few short passages were left out of the transcription because they were inherently off-topic.

Literature Review

There is still no substantial public debate about the postcolonial subject in Belgium. Some see this as a reflection of the condition of the literature on the subject, which they claim to be limited (Demart, 2013). Others oppose this view by pointing to several original, archive-based academic studies over the past half century (Stanard, 2012). However, the latter are works mostly done by (white, male) academic historians and as such avoid any real debate. Moreover, in my view, the state of academic literature on any subject does not give an accurate indication of the weight it has and should have as a societal issue. The attention that is given to the former colony in Belgian universities and the number of academic publications about the subject, whether critical or not, do not reflect the view or knowledge about it of the public at large. Academic publications have a specific target audience, and it is not the 'average' Belgian citizen. Either way, it is clear that the Belgian postcolonial memory is more singular and less critical than that of several neighbouring countries (cf. UK) and as such contrasts with them to a certain extent (Goddeeris, 2015). According to Isebald Goddeeris, the dominant narrative, of which David Van Reybrouck's *Congo. Een geschiedenis* (2010) can be viewed as the leading exponent, is one that perceives the Belgian colonisation of Congo as one of paternalism and idealism. Racism, subjugation, and exploitation for own material gain are usually not, or very fleetingly, affiliated with the Belgian colonisation in this discourse (Goddeeris, 2019).

Over the past two decades, however, the narrative began to be increasingly questioned and criticised (Van der Schueren, 2019). Around the turn of the century, singular literary works presenting a different view on Belgian colonisation emerged. Adam Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost* (1998) and Ludo De Witte's *De moord op Lumumba* (1999) are cases in point. Interestingly, the latter led to a parliamentary commission that investigated the Belgian involvement in Lumumba's assassination. In February 2002, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Louis Michel, officially apologised to Lumumba's family for Belgium's role in the first Prime Minister's assassination, nevertheless without admitting full responsibility (Beirlant, 2002). However, in the context of the 50th anniversary of Congolese independence in 2010, the dominant narrative as described by Goddeeris took over again as more attention was paid to the white, Belgian perspective on or memory of the Belgian Congo. As such, the Belgian postcolonial 'debate' still lacked a progressive political voice, and more importantly, a Congolese voice (Dirkx, 2015). In 2018, the debate on and consciousness about Belgium's colonial past seemed to take a turn for the better. According to Gert Huskens, the VRT-series *Kinderen van de Kolonie*, in which Congolese witnesses were heard, and the re-opening of the Royal Africa Museum in Tervuren in 2018 generated a tipping point in the Flemish approach to our colonial past (Huskens, 2018). The inauguration of the Lumumba-square in Brussels ("Patrice Lumumbaplein," 2018) can also be viewed as a small victory for the Congolese diaspora in Brussels and their cause. Last academic year (2018-2019) I myself felt a change in the context of my education, as we were encouraged to follow debates and lectures on 'decolonisation', which were abundant at the time. Nevertheless, it is striking that no such encouragements were made *this* academic year (at least not to me). This begs the question

whether there simply were no debates or lectures on ‘decolonisation’ to follow, or if our former colony was merely not on the academic calendar. Either way, this seems to indicate a rather fleeting attention for a topic that was only last year a “hot” one.

It is no secret that citizens with Congolese roots living in Belgium are still discriminated today. They are confronted with various forms of racism daily. Not only blatant racism is a critical issue, but institutional racism as well. Congo-Belgians today are, often from a very young age, confronted with insults associating the colour of their skin to a lack of intelligence or to being dirty, with insults equating them to animals, etc. (blatant)⁷. Furthermore, unemployment rates among this population are steep, even though the level of schooling among this population is higher in comparison to other groups, with and without migration background. Moreover they, women in particular, are often only eligible for ethnically stratified jobs (institutional). When they are asked, approximately 80 % feel like they do not receive as much opportunities in finding a job or housing as people without a migration background (KBS, 2017).

These prejudices towards Belgian citizens of Congolese descent can be rooted back not only to the scientific racism that was commonly accepted until the end of WWII in general (Collins, 2002), but specifically, as I aim to reveal in this dissertation, to the representations put forward by propaganda films commissioned by the Belgian government and other institutions (cf. the three pillars of Belgian colonisation: State – Corporations – Church) during colonisation. According to Ceuppens, it is often said that the adage ‘dominer pour servir’ (dominate to serve), coined by Pierre Ryckmans⁸, expresses the racist paternalism which characterised Belgian colonial policy most accurately:

Dominer pour server... C'est la seule excuse à la conquête colonial; c'en est aussi la pleine justification. Servir l'Afrique, c'est-à-dire la civiliser. Pas seulement faire naître des besoins nouveaux et fournir le moyen de les satisfaire: pas seulement exploiter, pas seulement enrichir; mais rendre les gens meilleurs, plus heureux, plus hommes. Pour pouvoir servir, il faut connaître; pour vouloir servir, il faut aimer. Et c'est en apprenant à connaître les noirs qu'on apprend à les aimer; car aimer, ce n'est que comprendre, comprendre jusqu'à l'héroïsme.⁹ (Ryckmans, 1931; as cited in Ceuppens, 2004, pp. 18-19)

Essentially, the official motive is bringing progress to less ‘civilised’ populations. If the ‘natives’ cannot realise this themselves, then ‘the solidarity of all peoples’ justifies foreign interference, i.e. colonialism (Dooms, 2013). Evidently, this paternalistic and idealistic stance is meant to camouflage the core objective of colonisation: economic and financial gain for the colonial

⁷ Examples: “vuile neger”; “wild beest”; “aap”; “makaak”; “je bent lelijk”; “vuile zwarte”, etc.

⁸ Governor General of the Belgian Congo, 1934-1946.

⁹ English translation: “It is the only excuse for the colonial conquest: it is also the full justification. To serve Africa, that is to civilise it. Not only to create new needs and provide the means to satisfy them, not only to exploit, not only to enrich, but to make people better, happier, more man. To be able to serve, you must know; to want to serve, you have to love. And it is by getting to know black people that we learn to love them; because loving is only to understand, to understand even to the point of heroism”.

power. Hence, colonial propaganda initially presented the Belgian Congo as a place filled with poor, half naked, savage, uncivilised and cruel “negroes”, who live in impenetrable landscapes filled with ferocious animals, are always happy and dance all day long (Vints, 1984). These conceptions are clearly visible in the colonial films concerned in this dissertation, which I aim to make clear later. In what follows, I will disclose the theoretical framework that has been the foundation for this project.

Postcolonial Cinema Studies

The theoretical foundation of my research is inspired by *Postcolonial Cinema Studies* by Sandra Ponzanesi and Marguerite Waller (2012). Postcolonial cinema studies integrate the field of postcolonial studies with that of cinema studies. Postcolonial studies, which will be elaborated upon further down, essentially entails a critique on empire and its aftermath. Ponzanesi and Waller explain that there are many intersections between postcolonial theory on the one hand, and film studies on the other. However, interaction between the two fields in the academic world has far from reached its full potential. Theoretical discourses on film have only sporadically included a postcolonial study of cinema. This is surprising when we bear in mind the enormous influence of some foundational postcolonial theorists, like Edward Saïd, in discussing the role of representation, visual or otherwise, in the construction and control of boundaries between East and West, the Other and the Self (Ponzanesi & Waller, 2012). Both postcolonial theory and film studies concern themselves immensely with the field of representation, as they look at the process in which language, whether filmic or not, successfully transmits reality as ‘discursive’ and ‘mediated’, and thus influenced by relations of power (Ponzanesi, 2018).

Postcolonial cinema is not a fixed segment of films, pointing to a certain genre, theme, or a specific group of people *per se* – although often refocussing on marginalised, subordinated, displaced or deterritorialised individuals –, but rather to a particular optic. Because postcolonialism is not perceived as a temporal designation here, but as an epistemic marker, it is a lens through which, in this case, film can be observed whilst addressing postcolonial questions of history, subjectivity, epistemology and their political consequences (Ponzanesi & Waller, 2012). In *Postcolonial Cinema Studies* this reaches from looking into empire cinema and the ways it justified the colonial project and its consequences, which is what I engage in as well, to connecting postcolonial cinema with and emphasising its lasting relevance during the era of globalisation.

Despite the penetration of other disciplines such as semiotics, philosophy and politics into the domain of film theory, and despite the fact that cinema studies began to take shape around the same time Saïd and Spivak’s (see later) activities started to intersect, a truly postcolonial approach towards cinema was not developed. As a critique of the “corporate-controlled mass media and culture of Hollywood” (Ponzanesi & Waller, 2012, p.3), cinema studies took up semiotics, psychoanalysis, and feminist/queer theory as their main theoretical points of

reference. In essence, these entailed a critique of the predominantly capitalist visual imagery. However, this critique seemed to fail to notice and even adhere to the fact that Hollywood had a monopolistic status in the global distribution of film. Early Soviet cinema, African cinemas, Cuban revolutionary film, etc., were hardly ever discussed with regard to matters of ideology, space, time, and the political imagery and US film theory had the habit of orientalising all 'foreign' (= non-US) productions. As such, the colonial rationale of centre/periphery had permeated the academic discipline of film theory as well. Similar to the construction of Western scholarship and the dominance of its view on the Orient (Said, 1979)(see later), Hollywood aesthetics, explanatory strategies, and evaluation criteria have been favoured due to the depreciation of 'foreign'/non-Hollywood film cultures (Ponzanesi & Waller, 2012). Film and its study evidently suffer from what is called 'Eurocentrism': the belief that all relevant knowledge, philosophy, literature, and by extension, film, has been produced by Europeans¹⁰ (Shohat & Stam, 1994).

Film Studies

Although theoretical discourses on film have only sporadically included a postcolonial study of cinema, and although the colonial rationale seems to have permeated the field, there have been approaches and schools in the discipline of film studies that concern themselves with similar issues as postcolonial theory. Hereafter follows a discussion of two such approaches.

Continental Film Theory – Structuralism – Post-structuralism

Continental film theory alludes to the continental (vs. analytical) philosophical approach to film. In its association with structuralism, and later with post-structuralism – which are in essence forms of ideology critique (Villarejo, 2013) – continental film theory questioned the tendency in the humanistic practice to treat (cinematic) language only as a tool for communicating already-existing beliefs. According to continental film theorists, cinematic language has the capacity to *produce* a perception, a belief, an idea, which it only *appears to represent*¹¹ (Cengage, 2020). Cinema is an ideological construction and device by nature. It (re)produces meanings that seemingly uphold the status quo. However, the representation on screen is rather distinct from the social reality it supposedly reflects (Hayward, 2013). Meaning is as such always closely connected to context and to mode of expression, and these are influenced by the institutional framework that confines them (Cengage, 2020). André Bazin, for example, believed that realism is the most important purpose of cinema, and that the perception and consequent interpretation of the moving image should be left to the spectator (Witussen, 2014).

¹⁰ Including the "new" Europeans in the US, Canada and Australia.

¹¹ Example: to make the world seem transparent, obvious, only naturally existing in a certain way (= realism), film artists will use continuity editing. This tends to go unnoticed by the viewer and it strengthens this view of the world.

Structuralism applied this idea that meaning is always firmly connected to a specific context and form of expression, not only to film itself, but also to its creator and audience. The creator's self-expression is not seen as exclusively a consequence of her/his character and quality, but as conditioned by specific institutional mechanisms. All subjects involved in film (creators, critics and audience) are caught in cultural and institutional frameworks that set objectives and limitations for creativity. Structuralism as such wanted to reveal all the hidden frameworks (such as the socio-historical context of production) behind the process of filmmaking. These structures are said to be ideological, as they attend to the needs or prosperity of a certain social system. However, in the end, structuralism, which had strived for total explanatory capacity (*total theory*), was abandoned for several reasons¹² and became post-structuralism.

Post-structuralism concerned itself more with the context within which a film is received. Not only the structural principles (i.e. the cultural and institutional frameworks) determine meaning, but the viewing circumstances and the relation of the spectator to the screen as well (different viewers are affected differently, cf. female/male spectators). As a result of this shift in focus, among several other changes, the assumptions about and the characteristics attributed to cinema in the 1980s became the following: 1) the relevance of the social impact of films on particular viewers; 2) the fact that art is continually connected to a historical and social context and needs to be situated as such, and that responses and interpretations within that context vary; 3) the conclusion that film is not only an art form, but also a mass medium with a significant social and political impact (Cengage, 2020).

As such, structural and post-structural film theorists acknowledged that socio-historical, cultural and institutional frameworks, such as colonialism, influence the process of filmmaking (the modes of expression, representation, montage, etc.) and viewing.

Cinema and Race

Since the 1990s, the field of film studies has also broadened its range of analysis to include the representation of race, ethnicity, religion, and sexuality (Ponzanesi, 2018). According to Alessandra Raengo, scholarship that focuses on race and blackness in film is, in essence, engaged in 'Critical Race Theory'. Critical Race Theory is a critical theory about race, relying among others on phenomenology, psychoanalysis, semiotics, and Marxist theory, but it also questions these canonical formations so that they can fully elucidate race. However, there is no consensus that Critical Race Theory has an authoritative presence in film studies (Raengo, 2016). Only Gerald Sim explicitly names his integration of Critical Race Theory and film studies "Critical Race Film Studies" (Sim, 2014).

¹² It was caught up in a particularly stringent formalism – leaving no room for the aesthetic experience –, was too focussed on the filmmaker and her/his product and ignored important hidden structures even though it implied to reveal them all.

Although 'critical race film studies' is not widely accepted as a distinct discipline, the concept of race in film has been studied substantially. It has been the subject of analysis on numerous occasions: the stereotyping of black Americans in cinema; the distorted image of African history and culture often displayed in film; the caricatural depiction of Latin Americans as 'bandidos' in Hollywood films, etc.¹³ (Stam & Spence, 1983). However, Louise Spence and Robert Stam were among the firsts to use the optic of *film theory* to analyse the relationship between racism and colonialism (Ponzanesi, 2018). At the time of writing *Colonialism, Racism, and Representation*, the existing studies tended to overemphasise realism, neglecting the fact that films are unavoidably constructs and representations. Moreover, by favouring the analysis of plot and character, the particularly *cinematic* dimensions of film were frequently ignored. Thus, this particular study wanted to build on, but also go beyond these methodologies, and the ultimate goal was to enable the decoding and deconstructing of racist images and sounds (Stam & Spence, 1983). After *Colonialism, Racism, and Representation*, many interpretations of the connection between cinema and racism followed. Valuable works include *Black Spectatorship* by Manthia Diawara (1998), *Black Looks* by Bell Hooks (1992), *Fear of the Dark: "Race," Gender and Sexuality in the Cinema* by Lola Young (1995), and *Genre, Gender, Race, and World Cinema* by Julie Codell (2007).

Proto- or quasi-postcolonial Filmmaking Projects

These theoretical approaches aside, there were also several filmmaking initiatives, before and after the inauguration of film- and postcolonial studies, that concerned themselves with proto- or quasi-postcolonial issues. The 1960s transnational "Third Cinema", for example, denounced "First Cinema's" (Hollywood) ideological, aesthetic and economic dominance, and differentiated itself from the European, nation-state based "Second Cinema". It challenged the persistent dichotomy between the West and the Rest, and many films and manifestos of that period paid homage to Frantz Fanon (e.g. *The Battle of Algiers*, 1966).

In the late 1970s, early 1980s, filmmakers Tahimik (Eric de Guia) and Trinh T. Minh-ha made several paradigm-shifting films that were about interacting across spaces, times, histories and languages. Coming to terms with, but also abandoning the differentiations and hierarchisations created through the colonial past, were central themes in these films. The aesthetic strategies they used were very distinctive and were related to uncovering alternatives to colonial-inflected modes of representation and knowledge production.

Lastly, around the beginning of the 2000s, several filmmakers and cinema studies scholars (cf. Hamid Naficy, Laura U. Marks, Aine O'Healy) conceptualised a variety of new, interrelated developments in filmmaking that converge with Ponzanesi and Waller's conceptualisation of postcolonial cinema. More and more cinemas of exile and diaspora, transnational feminist

¹³ E.g. *Slow Fade to Black* by Thomas Cripps (1977); *From Sambo to Superspade* by Daniel Leab (1976); *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks* by Donald Bogle (1974); *The Latin Image in American Films* by Allen Woll (1980).

cinema, haptic cinema, intercultural, and hybridised national cinemas have been contesting and greatly widening visual imaginaries (Ponzanesi & Waller, 2012).

Postcolonial Theory

The contributors to and editors of *Postcolonial Cinema Studies* (2012) aim to truly bring film studies and postcolonial studies into a profound and complex relationship with one another. They have instrumentalised postcolonial theoretical debates and close analyses of films and have used each mode of analysis to develop the other. Evidently, and before going into a number of postcolonial and other critical readings of empire cinema, several important postcolonial scholars and their concepts must be introduced and explained.

Postcolonial Theory?

Postcolonial theory is the academic study of the cultural, political, economic, historical and social legacy of European colonialism and imperialism from the 18th through to the 20th century. It entails a critique on empire and its aftermath (Ponzanesi, 2018). Originally limited to literature, today, it materialises in many different ways and interventions. Still, there is a fundamental claim that underlies these various manifestations: we cannot comprehend the world around us without considering its relationship to the history of imperialism and colonialism (Elam, 2019). This is exactly what I aim to reveal with regard to Belgian colonial cinema and the effects of its representations today.

Up until today, there is no consensus on whether 'postcolonialism' encompasses merely a temporal designation, as in *whatever happens/happened after colonialism*, or if it entails an epistemological angle (Ponzanesi, 2018). Some scholars warn against the restriction of the term's meaning to 'after-independence', because it does not contemplate the various ways in which postcolonial societies are still subordinated through neo-colonial practices. Subjection to the former colonial powers, even though not formally, did not end with independence, and postcolonialism is a continuing process (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2006).

Others agree that a new imperialistic context has arisen in which newly independent states have to navigate their way, but suggest that the 'postcolonial' should be defined as coming after formal colonialism. By differentiating between the 'postcolonial', 'postcoloniality' and 'postcolonialism', other dimensions of the umbrella concept can be discussed (Young, 2016).

Still others compare the 'post' in postcolonialism to the 'post' in postmodernism. Kwame Anthony Appiah sees a need to wipe the slate clean in the prefix 'post', to declare the contemporary condition over and to mark the beginning of a new, immediately following era of progress: "a modernity or a modernism to be *against*" (1992, p. 141). The prefix 'post' can thus

be seen as a straining for contrast, even though no reasonable grounds are given to formally distinguish the postmodern from the modern. The 'post' in postcolonial is, according to Appiah, similar to the prefix in postmodernism: characterised by a space-clearing gesture.

With regard to Belgium's attitude towards its former colony, in my opinion, Appiah's understanding of postcolonialism is the most fitting way to frame it. Belgium's colonial history is unpleasant to say the least, and its effects up until today are numerous. The neo-colonial affiliation between Belgium and Congo is a case in point. However, it is safe to say that the Belgian public stance towards its former colony¹⁴ was up until a few years ago not very critical or even non-existent. In most minds, including mine, the concept of 'decolonisation' was nothing more than the process of formal independence. Hence, and similar to what Appiah describes, the prefix in postcolonialism, at least with regard to the Belgian Congo, simply has a space-clearing character. *That was then and now is now*¹⁵ – with 'then' and 'now' being in complete contrast with one another. There seems to be a collective blind spot in Belgian society as the modal Belgian, and even the highly educated one, has no perception of what actually happened during the Belgian colonisation of Congo (1908-1960), and certainly not of its enduring consequences. This is not so astonishing once you realise that the knowledge about Congo and its past colonisation held by the majority of Belgians is conditioned by the limited and censored information provided by the government *during* the colonial occupation, or by the shared memories of ex-colonials. This knowledge is the undertone of the We/They, the Self/Other dichotomy (Doom, 2013), which is one of the fundamentals of postcolonial thinking.

Frantz Fanon

According to some, postcolonial theory had been developing a while before the term started to circulate. Even when the (formal) decolonisation process was still ongoing, the interaction between imperial culture and language, on the one hand, and local cultural practices and experiences, on the other, gave rise to proto-postcolonial literatures in which the authors articulated the tension stemming from this interaction and challenged the power of imperial culture knowledge (Ashcroft et al., 2006).

*The Wretched of the Earth*¹⁶ by Frantz Fanon, a Martinique psychiatrist who served as such during the Algerian independence struggle, can be considered such a text (Barry, 2002). In this invaluable work, Fanon proclaimed that the European colonising power had marginalised the colonised nation's history, even negated it, by claiming that there was none before they arrived. Thus, the first stage of action for colonised people to (re)gain their voice and to (re)familiarise with an identity lay in reclaiming their past. Similarly, the voices of contemporary Congo-Belgians, even though they are no longer colonised, are essential in 'decolonising

¹⁴ Similar to the attitude in several other countries with a colonial legacy.

¹⁵ Cf. anecdote at the beginning of this dissertation.

¹⁶ Originally published in French in 1961.

society's mind' by challenging the prevailing perceptions of Belgium's colonial history. The claim that Europe has in fact created the "Third World" by stealing its material wealth and labour to drive Europe's *own* enrichment (Fanon, 1965), - thereby reciprocally creating Europe and constructing the European identity in the contrasting image - returns in Edward Saïd's *Orientalism* (Loomba, 2002).

Edward Saïd – The West and the Rest

Although Frantz Fanon is considered the ancestor of postcolonial theory, it was Edward Saïd who really inaugurated it as a discipline. Following his foundational text *Orientalism*¹⁷, and the inauguration of postcolonialism in the academic world, postcolonial theory concerns itself not only with representations in literature, but in art works, photographs and, most importantly here, in *film* as well. The way representations are understood by other scholars and authors, as partial and augmenting a Eurocentric stance of superiority, is very much influenced by Saïd's work¹⁸ (Ponzanesi, 2018). Even though the full extent of *Orientalism* is immensely insightful, the importance of Saïd's work for the scope of this dissertation lies in his ideas and concepts about representation and 'Otherness', because these, among others, will be used to dissect the colonial films under consideration.

In *Orientalism*, Saïd describes how "the West" has shaped, controlled and produced "the Orient" politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively for centuries as an exotic, inferior Other through discourse. The Eurocentric ideas and imaginings of the Orient constructed during the post-Enlightenment period have inspired massively the fixed way of dealing with the Orient in Western scholarship - describing it, presenting it, authorising views of it, settling it, ruling over it - up until today. "Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Saïd, 1979, p.3).

By inscribing the Orient into distinct Otherness, the West (the "Occident") has constructed its *own* identity, consisting of that which is *not*-Oriental. The exotic Other is considered and depicted as cruel, promiscuous, savage, and so on, while the European/the Self is civilised, well-mannered, sensible, etc. In effect, the West has projected those things they do not wish to admit about themselves – cruelty, sexuality, moral decay, etc. – onto the Oriental Other. "European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (p.3). These identity constructions and the subsequent strengthening of Western culture, by determining that which is *not*-Western, have been the foundation and rationalisation for European colonial endeavours in Africa:

¹⁷ Originally published in 1978.

¹⁸ Important pieces in that sphere include *Unthinking Eurocentrism* (Shohat & Stam, 1994), *The Location of Culture* (Bhabha, 1994), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (Hall et al., 1997), and *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (Spivak, 1985).

To say simply that modern Orientalism has been an aspect of both imperialism and colonialism is not to say anything very disputable. ...I am interested in showing how modern Orientalism, ..., embodies a systematic discipline of accumulation. And far from this being exclusively an intellectual or theoretical feature, it made Orientalism fatally tend towards the systematic accumulation of human beings and territories. (p.123)

My account of nineteenth-century Orientalism in Chapter Two stopped at a particularly charged period in the latter part of the century, when the often dilatory, abstract, and projective aspects of Orientalism were about to take on a new sense of worldly mission in the service of formal colonialism. (p.205).

Although Fanon before him had already argued that it was Europe that created the "Third World", Saïd's critique was innovative in that he laid important connections between the production of knowledge and the exertion of power. He argued that European representations of the Orient have reinforced the creation of an Us/West versus Them/not-West dichotomy, which was central to the preservation and expansion of European hegemony over other territories. Moreover, because it was developed by men who were unavoidably ingrained in colonial history and relationships, the knowledge of the East, and by extension later the African continent, could never be stainless or objective. Rather, it was an ideological accompaniment of colonial power (Loomba, 2002).

Colonial Discourse

Most important, such texts can create not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe. In time such knowledge and reality produce a tradition, or what Michel Foucault calls a discourse. (Saïd, 1979, p.94)

Theories of colonial discourse

A lingering debate in postcolonial studies revolves around theories of 'colonial discourse'. In the words of Homi K. Bhabha, colonial discourse is "a form of discourse crucial to the binding of a range of differences and discriminations that informs the discursive and political practices of racial and cultural hierarchization" (1994, p.67). Some scholars, like Gayatri Spivak, have clung to the Foucauldian view of colonial power adopted in *Orientalism*, i.e. colonial power and discourse as all-present and pervasive. In *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, she discusses, among other things, "Intellectuals and power: a conversation between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze". She describes how, even though these intellectuals claim to criticise the sovereign subject and are supposed authorities where matters of heterogeneity and the Other are concerned, they actually (which is according to her common to much post-structuralist theory) use monolithic and anonymous subject-terms such as "*the Maoist*" and "*the workers' struggle*" to talk about certain subaltern groups, whereas intellectuals *are* named and differentiated

(Spivak, 1988). She also claims that to study and define the Other is in a way always a colonial activity, in that the Other is recreated as just another field of retrievable knowledge to be brought 'over here'; "rendering 'Asia' (and on occasion 'Africa) transparent" (1988, p.67). Furthermore, she claims that post-structural methodology disguises an underlying tenacious essentialism and that the inevitable heterogeneity of *the* subaltern makes it impossible to create a category of the 'subaltern' that has an effective voice (Ashcroft et al., 2006).

On the other end of the spectrum, Benita Parry, among others, challenges 'colonialist discourse theories' that assign an absolute power to colonial discourse in creating and disarticulating the native (/the Other/the Subaltern) and that tend to reject the foundational concepts of the problematic. Spivak's scepticism towards the binary opposition coloniser/colonised and her emphasis on heterogeneity, is a case at hand. Parry believes that the work and thoughts of early postcolonial thinkers, like Frantz Fanon, need to be brought back into the debate, and that colonialist discourse theories, such as Spivak's, need to be analysed in its 'politics' (Parry, 2004). Whatever the understanding of the extent of colonial discourse and the effect it had/has on the (post)colonised, I do presume the working of some sort of colonial discourse for the remainder of this dissertation. At the very least, the production of particular kinds of knowledge which aimed to present a certain reality is unquestionably observable in colonial films, which I will illustrate later on.

Stereotypes and 'racial fetishism'

During the period of colonial projects in Africa, and as one of the rationales for it, all peoples living on the continent were, to a certain extent, considered a homogenous – racialised - mass (Barry, 2002) of inferiors awaiting Western civilisation. They were *the* Other. For this kind of monolithic reasoning to work, the taking-root of a certain discourse was necessary, a discourse that could "construe the colonised as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction" (Bhabha, 1994, p.70). The colonial discourse Bhabha writes about refers to the production and establishment of stereotypical knowledge about coloniser and colonised through language and practice. Through this discourse, the colonised become, on the one hand, a radically distinct Other, but on the other, paradoxically, they become completely knowable and perceivable. 'Racial fetishism' is a manifestation of this 'contradiction of otherness'. The racial difference that is experienced as threatening is supplanted with and normalised by an image that suggests a more easily controllable and manipulated Other. The stereotype or a fetish stands in for the Other and as such serves a mediating purpose. It operates as a point of focus for what are considered the Other's most essential attributes. Difference is thus only known as a duplication of what one already knows (the 'new' is known as a duplication of the 'old'). The identity of the Self is protected from the threatening difference of the Other by this fetishism. Essentially, colonial discourse works to exaggerate the difference of the Other, and thus to make a firm distinction with the Self ('fixity'), yet it also operates to make the Other dependably 'knowable', and is thus conceived within a certain framework of 'sameness' (Hook, 2005).

Bhabha does not assign absolute power to the colonial discourse. Rather, he argues that, because the colonial authority failed to reproduce itself wholly, the colonial encounter was hybrid and ambivalent and subsequently made anti-colonial subversion possible (Bhabha, 1994). Still, he as well has been under fire for exorbitantly emphasising discourse and colonial representations (cf. Spivak) and for disregarding the material conditions of colonial rule (Loomba, 2002). However, while not neglecting the crucial importance of domination, exploitation, etc. in colonial relations¹⁹, I do follow Bhabha's view on colonial discourse in the sense that there is, in my opinion, always *some* room for agency. I therefore adhere to his argument that colonial authority and discourse did not function flawlessly, and that it failed to generate perfectly stable and fixed identities.

The Production and Instrumentalisation of Meanings

Like the masses, the colonized, the powerless and voiceless everywhere, visual representation cannot represent itself. (Mitchell, 1994, p.7)

Colonial discourse, or at least the production of a specific kind of knowledge, evidently served a certain purpose. Language, representation and discourse produce meanings, and the capacity to constitute and shape these meanings enables those who have it, to rule and determine the actions and thoughts of others. Discursively produced knowledge has the capacity to determine how certain objects and peoples are represented and imagined, it can create and fabricate identities, and it affects how certain schemes are used to control the behaviour of others (Hall, 1997). Hence, the importance of representations, and the capacity to structure these, for the colonial powers.

However, it is misguided to assume that the colonialist was simply fixated on specific, rigid images of or stereotypes about the colonised. Rather, various stereotypes were employed differentially according to the benefits they generated. Abdul R. JanMohamed demonstrates this by referring to Joyce Cary's novel *Aissa Saved* (1962), wherein Kolu children are mentioned as behaving with great decorum and gravity, whilst converted (to Christianity) Kolu adults are depicted as naughty, irresponsible children. The Kolu children are no threat to colonialism and thus can be portrayed in a gentle manner. The converted adults, however, jeopardise one of the crucial differences between the coloniser and the colonised: moral superiority. Thus, to recover the moral balance in the coloniser's advantage, the Kolu adults are depicted in a denigrating, childlike manner (JanMohamed, 1985).

¹⁹ According to JanMohamed, colonial discourse theories avoid an analysis of the domination, manipulation, exploitation, and disfranchisement that are inevitably involved in the construction of any cultural relationship. The 'ambivalence' Bhabha alludes to is in fact a product of deliberate imperialist duplicity operating through the economy of the Manichean allegory (1985).

Overall, the emergence of colonial cinema was clearly an attempt to produce certain knowledge and convey particular meanings for, mostly, propaganda purposes, which aimed to legitimise the colonial project.

The Impact of Film

Audience Theory

Van Schuylenbergh and Etambala suggest that the moving image, which has become an object of daily consumption, has a considerable influence on our relationship to the world, and that the perception of the materiality and reality of the social environment is conditioned by the representations suggested by it (2010). However, there is no consensus around the exact impact of media on its audiences.

The 'hypodermic needle theory'²⁰, proposed by the Frankfurt school, supposed media messages to be extremely powerful. According to that model, the audience is enormously susceptible to preferred meanings and takes them in without question. The audience is as such a passive mass 'injected' with certain messages created to set off a particular response (cf. Nazi propaganda). Another effects model is the 'cultivation theory'. This theory proposes that the more we are exposed to certain situations, the more we will change our views on them. Therefore, the more certain situations and populations are shown in media texts from a specific point of view, the more audiences adjust their own views to match the point of view proposed by the media text (Fourie, 2001). In the case of Belgian colonial propaganda, this would suggest that audiences of propaganda films take over the colonialist view of Congolese people(s) as poor, uncivilised and childlike "negroes". However, these, rather structural, effects models have been criticised by several theorists. *Ten things wrong with the media 'effects' model* by David Gauntlett is a case in point. Gauntlett argues, among other concerns, that the 'media effects' approach tackles social problems backwards²¹ and that it is not grounded in actual, coherent theory (2006). Instead he proposes a 'pick and mix' theory which suggests that audiences select bits of media that are relevant for them and their lives and disregard other parts (Gauntlett, 2003).

John Fiske, an influential media scholar, was one of the first to apply semiotics in his analysis. He suggests that people spontaneously classify real life events in reference to texts (cinematic texts included) that they have experienced in the past. People create a context for, and make sense and meaning of what they are seeing or experiencing through intertextual referencing (Fiske, 1987). In this case, it would be possible that a white Belgian experiencing a situation in which a Congolese (Belgian) citizen is involved, refers back to texts and images s/he has read

²⁰ A form of media effects theory.

²¹ "The 'media effects' approach, in this sense, comes at the problem backwards, by starting with the media and then trying to lasso connections from there on to social beings, rather than the other way around" (2004, pp. 1-2).

or seen in the past to make sense of it (cf. colonial propaganda, children's books, secondary school educational books, news reports, etc.). However, according to Fiske, media do not have the ability to simply indoctrinate audience members. He argues that the power of and variety in audience interpretation surpasses the capacity of any institution to impose a particular message or ideology by far.

David Morley, media researcher, proposes three kinds of audience interpretation or 'reading'. In the dominant or hegemonic reading, the observer shares the programme's code²² and accepts the programme's 'preferred reading' completely. In the negotiated reading, the programme's code is only partly shared and the preferred reading accepted broadly. However, the observer customises the preferred reading to her/his own position and interests. Finally, in the oppositional or counter-hegemonic reading, the observer rejects both the programme's code and preferred reading, and offers an alternative interpretation. As such, texts do not possess a singular meaning. Rather there are different possible meanings secluded in a text, and these are determined by both the text and the audience (Sujeong, 2004).

These audience theorists aside, Marshall McLuhan, a Canadian philosopher and communication theorist whose work contributed enormously to media theory, focused more on the *nature* of the medium that conveys a message. He argued that societies have always been moulded more by the nature of the medium through which is communicated than by the content of that communication. Moreover, he proclaimed that it is not possible to comprehend social and cultural changes without knowledge of the workings of media (McLuhan, 2001). The philosopher created two categories of media: hot and cold. Film is considered a hot medium, which means that it extends one single sense (here: vision) in "high definition" (= the state of being well filled with data). It provides a lot of (visual) information, does not leave much to be filled in or completed by the audience and as such is low in participation. Cool media, such as cartoons, on the other hand, demand more active participation of the viewer to determine meaning (McLuhan, 1994). Applied to colonial propaganda, this would mean that viewers take in the information provided by colonial propaganda film without having to fill in, and thus think much, for themselves.

Independently of how one understands these divergent approaches in audience theory, all of the above mentioned theorists believe that the media do have some sort of impact on their audience (cf. influence on audiences' views). Moreover, film as a medium is equipped with specific formal and aesthetic properties, which can be employed to promote a range of viewpoints (Ponzanesi & Waller, 2012), or 'preferred meanings', which are meant to and *can* have an effect on the audience. In my opinion, the fact that colonial and imperial powers continued to make use of film as an instrument of legitimation throughout their endeavours indicates a certain margin of success.

²² Meaning, system of values, attitudes, beliefs and assumptions.

Empire Cinema

According to Ponzanesi and Waller, to bring attention to the practices of postcolonial cinema, it is pertinent to revisit empire cinema. These films were instrumental in shaping, enforcing and most importantly *naturalising* the relationship between the hegemon and the dominated Others, and in presenting a specific reality wherein the rule over these Others was legitimised. They played an important role in reaching political consensus in the metropole by illustrating its imperial proficiency. Postcolonial cinema historiography provides a new optic through which these films can be read and observed, their visual codes and narrative discourses of (white) supremacy unpacked, and their tensions and ambiguities discovered (Ponzanesi & Waller, 2012). This is exactly what I aim to do with the Belgian colonial films under consideration. Others before me have engaged in similar projects with regard to colonial or imperial cinema, which indicates the relevance of this study. Hereafter follows a concise overview of a number of such projects.

In the section “Cinemas of Empire”, three contributors to *Postcolonial Cinema Studies* discuss empire cinema. Ruth Ben-Ghiat brings Italian filmic and imperial histories together while discussing the film *Kif Tebb*²³. She argues that the film offers a window into both the continuities and ruptures of Italian imperial ideologies and iconographies throughout the period of Fascism and from silent to sound cinema. Italian imperial ideologies were pervaded by a particular resentment of being historically marginalised by the “Great Powers”; having an empire of its own gave Italy the power to refute these perceptions of ‘backwardness’. Ben-Ghiat discloses how these ideologies were present in empire films through the obsessive display of communication, military, agricultural and medical technology. Further in the section, Julie Codell reveals how the use of blackface in some British and American empire films both signified and de-essentialised racial difference. Lastly, Aniko Imré discloses how a series of historical epics produced in the Eastern bloc between 1960 and 1980 implicitly challenged Soviet domination, ironically through a self-colonising identification with the West (Ponzanesi & Waller, 2012).

Aside from these three essays, several other scholars have engaged in critical analyses of empire cinema. Peter J. Bloom’s *French Colonial Documentary: Mythologies of Humanitarianism*, for example, unveils how the remaking of the French colonies in the image of France was crucial to its own national identity. Bloom argues that the way the (soon to be) colonies were visually represented – as anarchic and pre-civilised – facilitated the perceived necessity of a civilising project, and thus of colonial intervention as a discourse of social reform. He shows how colonial documentary films were used to promote the colonial ideas to young adults, as they attempted to equate the moving image with the real (Bloom, 2008).

In *Colonial Cinema and Imperial France, 1919-1939, White Blind Spots, Male Fantasies, Settler Myths*, David Henry Slavin explains how French cinema expressed the changing

²³ Camerini, 1928.

policies and principles of French colonialism during the interwar years. He examines the racial and gender subtexts abundantly present in French colonial cinema and argues that these subtexts supported 'blind spots' which helped to conceal social injustices. Concentrating mostly on these blind spots, Slavin focuses less on the filmic aspects and more on the different themes and understated messages in the films. According to him, the power of these messages lies in the blind spots, because they fend off conscious, rational thought, rendering the visual effect of the films on racial presumptions especially great (Slavin, 2001).

In *Empire Films and the Crisis of Colonialism, 1946-1959*, Jon Cowans examines public opinion about colonialism in Britain, France and the United States, by focussing exclusively on cinema. Cowans presents multiple reasons why he chose to concentrate on film, one of which is its capacity to shape and reflect popular views. Cowans states that because people knew very little about their countries' colonies or their history, they were easy to influence through film (Cowans, 2015).

Another interesting analysis of British empire cinema is *Cultural Histories of Cinema* by Lee Grieveson and Colin MacCabe, which consist of two parts: *Empire and Film* and *Film and the End of Empire*. *Empire and Film* examines films in and about British colonies regarding their forms of production, distribution and exhibition. It reveals the relations between Empire and film, how the history of British cinema is a crucial component of the history of Empire, and how imperial rule is closely connected to the emergence of the documentary film. The distorted and misleading original commentaries accompanying the films are replaced by new ones, revealing what images are left out or what the narration does not say. In other cases, the book shows how, despite the intention of the filmmaker and the adhering voice-over, the truth about colonialism and the effects on people subjected to it cannot be concealed (De Groof, 2015).

Film and the End of Empire examines films about the British empire during the period of 1939-1965 specifically. The authors show how the start of changing geopolitical strategies and realities after WWII infuses these films. The rhetoric of unity adopted by the British government, and the subsequent addition of ideas of 'development' and 'Commonwealth' to display the benevolence of its trusteeship and its role in organising economic self-sufficiency, was meant to cloak the contradictions of liberalism and is clearly present through British empire cinema. Broadly, the essays focus on the entangling of cultural representation and political and economic control. They look at the ways how certain actors, whether state or non-state, employed media to mould the attitudes and behaviours of people to preserve the colonial governmental order (Grieveson & MacCabe, 2011).

Lastly, the Dutch historian and film director Gerda Jansen Hendriks has written several, some very extensive, works on Dutch colonial filmmaking. *Een voorbeeldige kolonie: Nederlands-Indië in 50 jaar overheidsfilms, 1912-1962* is a 500 pages long thesis on films about the Dutch East Indies commissioned by the Dutch authorities during the years 1912 to 1962. As she acknowledges herself, there were, at the time of writing many studies about the Netherlands

and its colony, but very little about films on the Dutch East Indies, so she decided to fill in the gap (Hendriks, 2014). Different to several of our other neighbouring countries, Belgium does not display that much scholarship and research on Belgian colonial cinema²⁴, and close to none (translated) in English. Therefore, I believe that this dissertation can be a means to help ameliorate this void.

Assessment

Theoretical discourses on film have only sporadically included a postcolonial study of cinema. This is surprising since both fields concern themselves immensely with the field of representation. By looking at film through a postcolonial lens, important postcolonial questions of history, subjectivity, epistemology and their political consequences can be addressed. Consequently, I have observed the Belgian colonial films under consideration in this dissertation from a postcolonial perspective and used important concepts in the field to make sense of the representations in it; what purpose(s) did they serve and what did they enable? Furthermore, combining the postcolonial insights on power relations with those of continental film theory²⁵ on the workings of cultural and institutional frameworks, offered me an interesting perspective when looking into the people and institutions behind both the colonial films and *Kinderen van de Kolonie*. Lastly, the thoughts put forward by audience theory and several critical discussions of empire cinema, whether postcolonial or not, bolster the idea that (colonial) film was indeed instrumental in shaping, enforcing and naturalising the relationship between hegemons and the dominated Others. As such, all of the above has provided me with crucial insights to guide my analysis and, consequently, to formulate certain conclusions with regard to the research question at hand.

²⁴ Examples are Francis Ramirez and Christian Rolot's *Histoire du cinema colonial au Zaïre, au Rwanda et au Burundi* (1985); Luc Vints' *Kongo made in Belgium: beeld van een kolonie in film en propaganda* (1984); and Patricia Van Schuylenbergh and Mathieu Zana Etambala's *Patrimoine d'Afrique Centrale* (2010).

²⁵ In its association with structuralism and post-structuralism.

Analysis

CINEMATEK

The DVD-box under consideration, *Belgisch Congo Belge* (2010), is provided by Cinematek, Belgium's royal film archive. It was one of the various initiatives taken by Cinematek in the context of the 50th anniversary of Congolese independence, and was established in cooperation with the Royal Africa Museum in Tervuren, CEGESOMA²⁶, and the VRT. It includes fifteen films by the three leading non-religious Belgian colonial filmmakers.

As stated on Cinematek's website (www.cinematek.be), this DVD-box is the only chance for the public at large to discover the Belgian colonial heritage of film. Anyone can purchase the DVD-box and accompanying booklet online for a reasonable. That is how I obtained it myself. As it is *relatively* easy and cheap to access, the DVD-box and booklet showed great potential to open up the public debate, to sensitise the public at large about the power of filmic representation and to shed some light on our colonial past. However, what the booklet (containing information on Belgian colonial cinema and the films included in the DVD-box) provides, is hardly more than an objective description of the evolution of Belgian colonial cinema and its filmmakers. Even the summaries of the included films hardly present any sensitising arguments, let alone criticism. Granted, 2010 was the year in which David Van Reybrouck's *Congo* was published and reinforced the dominant narrative in Belgium's postcolonial memory. However, I do feel like Cinematek - and the cooperating institutions for that matter - had a responsibility towards the public, especially since it is a public utility foundation. As such the DVD-box could have been ahead of the postcolonial debate that was to unfold in the years to come.

Patrimoine d'Afrique Centrale (Van Shuylenbergh & Etambala, 2010), on which part of the information provided in the booklet is based, *does* entail a more critical reflection. This begs the question why Cinematek and the cooperating organisations did not take this more critical note into their project as well. As I have stated above, I believe that, when you put something like this out there and make it accessible to the public at large, you have a certain responsibility. Especially since works like that of Van Schuylenbergh and Etambala are *not* accessible to the larger public. The average Belgian, and especially the average Fleming - the 351 pages long book is written in French -, probably does not know that this book exists. I for one did not, prior to my research. More generally, not a lot of Belgians engage with academic texts on a daily basis, or ever for that matter. However, since the postcolonial debate in Belgium has only really started to take root over the past few years, the contents of such academic texts could have been (and still is) crucial in changing the overarching postcolonial narrative in Belgium sooner.

²⁶ Studie- en Documentatiecentrum Oorlog en Hedendaagse Maatschappij.

In this regard, Cinematek and the cooperating organisations (the Royal Africa Museum in particular) seem to have missed the opportunity to be pioneers in the long-overdue postcolonial debate in Belgium. An opportunity to familiarise the Belgian public with the actual, factual truth of our colonial past, and sensitise them about the (mis)leading power of (filmic) representation. Their colleagues in the United Kingdom for example did exactly that. By simply surfing to the website colonial film (www.colonialfilm.org.uk), anyone can access an extensive archive of British empire films (over 150 films are available for viewing online) with critical commentaries provided by historians and other academics. This, again, shows that Belgium is rather avoidant concerning its former colony.

Even though it has been ten years now since the DVD-box was released, I wanted to understand why Cinematek decided to supplement it with such a plain, rather uninvolved, booklet. To that end, I contacted the editor in chief, Erik Martens, and he was kind enough to correspond with me via email. I asked him why the booklet was not more critical, especially since several parts were based on *Patrimoine d'Afrique Centrale*. Essentially, his answer was twofold. Firstly, in his opinion, each film shows the viewer a human image that is completely unacceptable today. It is obvious to him and the editorial board that the moral viewpoints taken up in many of the films are improper and offensive. Secondly, because it is a historical series, it was their intention to present a historical reality derived from primary resource material. He maintains that historians very often concern themselves with materials about which very little good can be said from a moral point of view, but that the research of historians has a very different angle and purpose than that of moral philosophers. He concludes that historians essentially want to explain and disclose what a certain past looked like (E. Martens, personal communication, March 23, 2020).

Although I greatly appreciate Erik Marten's cooperation and honesty, and understand where he is coming from, I maintain that some of his reasoning is unsatisfactory. The moral viewpoints taken up in the films might be obviously improper and offensive to him, but I dare say not to everyone. The fact that the editors of the booklet did not feel the need to provide this information can be understood by the cultural and institutional framework that confines them; they produced the booklet in their capacity as historians. However, the biased knowledge that many people have about our former colony, and the continuous discrimination towards citizens with Congolese descent, in my opinion, show that those same viewpoints are still alive in our society. Moreover, many of the reels, especially those of Gérard De Boe, really succeed in conveying the Belgian Congo as a 'model-colony'. While watching his films, I sometimes had to remind myself that the Belgian colonisation was indeed a bad thing, and that the Congolese people(s) were in fact not 'happy and dancing all the time'. As such, I suggest that the absence of a truly substantive debate about our former colony and its consequences up until today, is partly due to the lack of unequivocally contradicting information provided by institutions such as Cinematek. Consequently, the following part of this dissertation attempts to fill in the gap left by the booklet. In the next pages, I will offer a concise historical overview of Belgian colonial cinema by discussing the two filmmakers mentioned in the beginning of this dissertation.

Further on, I will discuss the films included in the DVD-box and provide a much-needed comment on representation.

Belgian Colonial Filmmaking

Historical Overview

It is no secret that, when King Leopold II gained control of what was to be called the “Congo Free State” as a result of the 1885 Berlin Conference, the Belgian government was not a big advocate of having a colony. Therefore, Leopold II’s private property in Central Africa had to be popularised and legitimised in order to sway the Belgian public’s opinion and to attract investors. Ten years after Leopold II had obtained the Congo Free State, the brothers Lumière invented the cinematograph and the moving image gradually became a new means of propagating the colony. The mass success that the first screenings of black-and-white reels had with audiences did not go unnoticed. In 1897, a group of businessmen from Brussels, brought together by Albert Thys²⁷, set up the first Belgian production company called L’Optique belge (Van Schuylenbergh & Etambala, 2010). The goal of this company, even though not explicitly mentioned, was soon revealed to be for a big part winning over the Belgian public with regard to the colony (Vints, 1984).

Unlike previous means of pro-empire propaganda, such as museums, monuments, expositions (cf. l’Exposition universelle d’Anvers in 1894) and even education, which had a high and established degree of state involvement, the moving image was entirely novel and thus completely open for various actors, including non-state actors (Stanard, 2012). However, the first attempt by L’Optique belge to raise some kind of colonial awareness through film failed²⁸. Moreover, in 1894-95 and then again in 1901 the idea of the Belgian state annexing the Congo Free State was brought up and the colony’s management received more and more international criticism, especially from the United Kingdom (Vints, 1984).

When the Congo Free State eventually became the “Belgian Congo” due to the inevitable acquisition of the colony by the Belgian state in 1908, film as a means of colonial propaganda seemed to be picked up again, after the initial failure in 1897 (Vints 1984). The most noteworthy venture was le Cinématographe des colonies (the Cinéma colonial), which was founded in December 1908 by businessmen who were all tied to the colony one way or another. Again, the objective of this film enterprise was to influence the public opinion in favour of the Belgian colony and to advertise overseas expansion (Stanard, 2012). Accordingly, associated filmmakers François Evenepoel and Léon Reinelt made several films²⁹, which focussed more

²⁷ An associate of Leopold; the Brussels business establishment controlling the most important colonial enterprise, the Compagnie du Congo pour le Commerce et l’Industrie (CCCI), set up in 1886 (Vints, 1984)

²⁸ L’Optique belge had sent a photographer-cineaste to the Congo to shoot some reels for the *Zoographe*. However, not a single film about the Congo is shown in the *Zoographe* that year (Vints, 1984, p.33)

²⁹ Examples: *Le marché de Boma*; *Le fort de Shinkakasa*; *Le défilé de la Force publique*. (Stanard, 2012).

on future achievements of Belgian 'civilisation' than on those of the past, as the latter were tainted by the atrocities the local population had endured under the infamous rubber policy during Leopold II's reign and by the national and international denunciation of that system (Van Schuylenbergh & Etambala, 2010). Moreover, no films were made about Leopold II to memorialise him as the architect of the empire, even though he had only recently died (Stanard, 2012). Without numerating the several filmmaking projects and filmmakers, pro-colonial film on the Congo in the pre-war period, and by extension the whole colonial propaganda network, displayed three main characteristics. First of all, blacks (the Other) are presented in a childlike and ridiculing manner, as such emphasising their 'need for civilisation' by whites (the Self). Secondly, the focus on economic achievements, such as railways and mining activities, stands out tremendously. And thirdly, colonial films and other propaganda material focus mainly on reaching youths and generating among them a "colonial calling" (Vints, 1984).

When WWI broke out, the Belgian government, who feared losing its African territory to expansionistic Germany, was stimulated to make several films on the colony. These films emphasised the contribution to the war effort of Belgians living in the Congo, whilst also devoting attention to the achievements of the civilisation mission (Stanard, 2012). Similarly, in October 1916, the Ministry of Colonies set up a documentation and popularisation service (*Service de documentation et de vulgarisation*) in Le Havre to ameliorate the perceived lack of images on the Congo (Van Schuylenbergh & Etambala, 2010). This service had the objective of showing the military and economic efforts by the colony to the fled Belgians, as well as to the allies (Vints, 1984). Director Ernest Gourdinne was subsequently sent to the colony to make several films, which stressed mostly industry, transportation and raw materials³⁰ (Stanard, 2012). After the war, with the events at the Ijzer and at Tabora becoming symbols of heroism, and mostly the latter strengthening ties between Belgium and its colony, there was a certain nationalistic tendency, which was perfect for the colonial wave of propaganda that would flood the country in the 1920s (Vints, 1984).

Ernest Genval

By the end of the 1920s, the colonial propaganda network had expanded to include more Belgian colonial films, of which many were owed to Ernest Genval (Vints, 1984). Ernest Genval (born Ernest Thiers) was born in 1884 in Dison. Aside from being a (colonial) filmmaker, Genval was a poet, 'chansonnier', a cabaret singer and a writer. After being the 'army's chansonnier' in WWI, he eventually made his way to the Belgian Congo in 1924, where he performed as a chansonnier for a duration of seven months. After writing several new songs and a colonial novel stimulated by his current environment, Genval started to make his first films. He even set up a production company, L'Essor Cinégraphique, which he would use for several other filmmaking projects later on, including propaganda films.

³⁰ Examples: *Les tracés du chemin de fer établis pendant la guerre*; *Le minerai de cuivre du Katanga*; *L'installation d'un colon dans le Kasai* (1917-1919).

In 1925, Genval received a film assignment from the Belgian government with the objective of raising public awareness about the Belgian Congo in Belgium. At that time, the colony was still little known by the public at large. While criss-crossing the country, Genval came into contact with several industrial and agricultural companies which asked him to shoot promotional material on their behalf (Cinematek, 2010). These projects were completely financed by these companies and were frequently of short duration (Vints, 1984). *De Boma à Tshela par le chemin de fer du Mayumbe* (1926), which is included in the DVD-box, was one such film (Cinematek, 2010). However, Genval also made films on his own initiative and for his own account. The best-known film in this tier of his work is *Congo qui s'éveille*, a lengthy documentary which premiered in Brussels in 1927 and was brought into theatres by Gaumont-Metro-Goldwyn later on (Vints, 1984). After the success of *Congo qui s'éveille*, Genval returned to the Belgian Congo in 1928 and shot numerous propaganda films commissioned by the colonial government and some big companies. An example is *Union Minière du Haut-Katanga*, which was a promotional newsreel for the influential mining company Union Minière. Genval also produced social, medical and religious films in this period (Cinematek, 2010).

In 1931, Genval's *L'Action Civilisatrice de la Belgique au Congo* is presented to King Albert I. This film was commissioned by the Ministry of Colonies and was made for the centenary of Belgian independence and for "the 50th anniversary of our occupation in Congo". According to the program booklet, the film shows 'contemporary Congo, without correction or stage arrangement' and how the Belgian occupation has brought peace to a country previously plagued by barbaric customs, in-fighting, cannibalism and slave trade. However, every annual report up till then had mentioned some sort of passive resistance by the Congolese people, which resulted in armed operations by the colonial troops. The fight against Kimbanguism and the subsequent imprisonment of the prophet Simon Kimbangu, from which the movement got its name, is a case in point. Expectedly, the film does not allude to any of these struggles (Vints, 1984).

Gérard De Boe

Gérard De Boe was born in 1904 and died just a few months before the Congolese independence in 1960. De Boe had not always aspired to be a colonial cineaste. In fact, he was a teacher at the Collège Sainte-Marie in Oudenaarde for a while. However, soon he became involved in the colonial project, as he was employed by the colonial administration as a health officer in 1927. He set off to Leopoldville that same year. During his second and third term in Congo he started to get interested in photography and in 1937 he made his first short film called *La maladie du sommeil*. However, the Belgian Colonial Office, to which he tried to sell his photographs and films when he was on leave in Belgium, rejected his offer (Cinematek, 2010). The Belgian Colonial Office, which had a brand-new photographic and film section, was mostly concerned with the economic documentation of the Congo.

In 1938, De Boe was appointed medical auxiliary 3rd class and arrived back in Leopoldville. After working for the General Government's Hygiene Department there, he was sent to Doruma, where he and another public health officer started to organise camps for lepers living in that region. It is in this period that De Boe made *La lèpre* (1938), a film included in the Cinematek DVD-box. His goal was to raise awareness for the disease back in Belgium and he realised that the moving image was a far better medium to do so than a written report. Léon Pétilion, De Boe's chief of staff and future Governor General of the Congo, who had seen the film, demanded that De Boe go on a filmmaking mission for a year. Under the auspices of the Belgian Colonial Office, he was to shoot propaganda films in Congo, while still working as a medical auxiliary in Leopoldville (Cinematek, 2010). As I have explained above, films made in the colony were predominantly commissioned by industrial and agricultural companies beforehand (cf. Ernest Genval) (Stanard, 2012). That it was now official colonial institutions that authorised the filmmaking project somewhat marked the beginning of the government's involvement in production, coordination and distribution of film. From the colonial government's perspective, De Boe was the ideal filmmaker. Him being an agent of the state made ideological control of the production of his films that much easier. The fact that the first assignment De Boe received was to adapt *La lèpre* so that it would be more optimistic, is a case in point.

La lèpre was soon to be followed by many other colonial propaganda films and documentaries made by De Boe (e.g. *La Fomulac*, 1939). At first, the filmmaker paid out-of-pocket for most of the filmmaking project, but gradually he gained more financial support from the General Government. At the start of WWII, De Boe, who was living in Stanleyville, was called back to Leopoldville where he started to work for the Ciné-Photo cell. This new Information Department, set up by Governor General Pierre Ryckmans, had the objective to proliferate propaganda related to the war effort, both in Congo and abroad. As such, De Boe was to accompany the Belgian colonial troops in Abyssinia in 1941 and capture their undertakings. However, his film equipment was lost and De Boe was unable to make a single film (Cinematek, 2010).

Failed film projects were not abnormal during WWII, as most of Belgian filmmaking, be it colonial or otherwise, was put to a halt during that period. It was the period *after* WWII which would be the great era of Belgian colonial cinema. After the war, mostly in the late 1940s, the colonial administration resumed the production of films. Interesting to mention at this point is the continuous nationalisation of colonial filmmaking. A case in point is French filmmaker André Heyman, with whom the Ministry of Colonies went into contract after WWII, but whom many tried to replace because he was not Belgian (Stanard, 2012). However, it was not the Ministry of Colonies, but the Information Department in Leopoldville that would become the main producer of films during this period. It had gained a considerable autonomy from Brussels and became the leading institution for all things concerning film (Cinematek, 2010), even though the film crew there remained weak (Stanard, 2012). Film production started to flourish enormously, not the least thanks to De Boe's new films. In this period the colonial film became a full-fledged instrument in the service of a new-found patriotism (Cinematek, 2010). At the

same time, the Belgian approach towards its colony transformed. The negative consequences of the overpowering economic structures and excessive labour efforts could no longer be ignored, and issues on the development of domestic markets and questions of a social and political nature started to surface. Thus, a new political will emerged to remodel the Belgian Congo economically, which manifested partly in the Ten-Year Plan for the economic and social development of the Belgian Congo (1949). Colonial propaganda soon followed: the 1950s are characterised by the production of triumphalistic and optimistic films and photographs, which highlight the success of the civilising mission (Vints, 1984). This shift is clearly noticeable when comparing colonial films produced before and after WWII (see later).

After officially resigning from the colonial service in 1948, De Boe set up his own film- and production company³¹ in 1949 and continued to produce films about the Belgian Congo, among other subjects. From 1949 to 1952, while developing short films commissioned by the Information and Documentation Centre³² (CID), he was able to produce several documentary films on his own initiative (e.g. *The Black Elite of Tomorrow*, 1950), which were thereafter purchased by the CID because they were considered propaganda-worthy. In 1954, De Boe travelled to Congo once more in order to produce several short-to-mid length films meant for the wider audience at home and abroad. He convinced the CID to support him financially by emphasising the positive effect these films would have on the proliferation of Belgian colonial propaganda (Cinamatek, 2010). This demonstrates how the relationship between the colonial institutions and the colonial filmmakers was not completely one-sided. They had an influence on each other and both parties tried to yield the other to their own advantage.

De Boe's production company soon became the best known and the most active where Congo was concerned. In 1957, De Boe returned to Congo one last time and shot a considerable amount of documentaries revolving around agriculture and several initiatives (educational, social, missionary work, etc.) deployed for the 'benefit of the local population' (e.g. *In 50 Years* (1958) and *Lovanium* (1959)). *Tokende* (1958), which is not included in the DVD-box, was the most successful film of De Boe's career. However, it was adapted in 1961 in order to make it more objective and acceptable to everyone.

Partly because of the recent events in the context of Congolese independence, a gradual change of mentality has occurred and criticism towards the Belgian colonisation is increasingly vocal: from now on, one looks completely differently upon this history, which is now definitively a thing of the past³³. (Cinamatek, 2010, pp.23-24)

³¹ 'Produktie Gérard De Boe'.

³² Voorlichtings- en Documentatiecentrum van Belgisch Congo en van Ruanda-Urundi (CID), Brussel.

³³ Translated from the Dutch version in the booklet, being: "Mede door de recente gebeurtenissen in het kader van de Congolese onafhankelijkheid heeft zich immers geleidelijk een mentaliteitswijziging voltrokken en klinkt de kritiek op de Belgische kolonisatie steeds luider: voortaan kijkt men heel anders aan tegen deze geschiedenis, die nu definitief tot het verleden behoort" (2010: 23-24).

The English version in the booklet: "The gradual change in mentality and increasingly sharp criticism with regard to Belgian colonisation, reinforced by recent events relating to the independence of the Congo, have completely altered everything including feelings about the former situation, which will never return" (p.87).

However, the orchestrated murder of Patrice Lumumba, the persistent neo-colonial affiliations between Belgium and Congo, and the institutional and blatant racism towards citizens of Congolese descent, seem to suggest otherwise.

Themes Across the Reels

Even though there are considerable differences between the fifteen films included in the DVD-box, and there is a clear temporal evolution, there are certain themes that can be found across the different reels. Furthermore, as I will elaborate further down while discussing *From Boma to Tshela* and *Lovanium*, the change in geopolitical attitudes over time is clearly visible in Belgian colonial film as well. Nevertheless, various aspects seem to be inherent to Belgian colonial filmmaking³⁴.

The 'black physique' and bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence

Firstly, there appears to be an obsession with and a clear emphasis on the 'black physique'. Across the different films a considerable amount of attention, translated into minutes of film, is devoted to physical appearance, dance, sports, and manual labour. In De Boe's *The Black Elite of Tomorrow* (1950) for example, which is only 16'16" long, over five minutes is spent on non-traditional educational activities, of which more than half is spent on sports and the remaining minute or so on students cooking their own meals. Comparably, in *Mangbetu* (1954) and *Wagenia Fishermen* (1952), which focus on Congolese 'traditional, local tribes' and demonstrate a certain ethnographic interest of the filmmaker, lengthy images exhibit and fixate on the physical strength and appearance, as well as on the 'natural rhythm' of the local population. In *Mangbetu*, a considerable amount of time is spent on the (tribe's (traditional)' physique, attire, hairstyles and, most noticeably, dance. Sentences like "The pureblood Mangbetu has perfect body proportions. He is large, sturdy and tough", and "The Mangbetu woman is physically attractive", are cases in point.

³⁴ The colonial films under consideration were observed and transcribed in Dutch. The original Dutch transcriptions can be found in Annex I and II. The following sections include quotes and paraphrases translated by me into English.

Similarly, the curious fascination with dance is demonstrated by the last five minutes of the 30min film being completely devoted to the 'stool dance':



35

³⁵ *Mangbetu.*

In *Wagenia Fishermen*, it is the physical strength of Wagenia men that receives the most consideration. “The bodily strength of the Wagenia is extraordinary” the narrator exclaims, while the camera focusses on the muscular arms of the men convening in the ‘big council’. When the fishermen are shown entering the water in their boats, rowing against the stream, the lens is often fixated on their backs and arms, again emphasising, without naming this time, their physical strength.



This obsession with the black physique can be understood by ‘racial fetishism’ as explained above. In this case, the image of the ‘physically strong’ Congolese acts as a fetish/stereotype which serves a mediating purpose. It stands in for the Congolese Others and operates as a point of focus for what are considered their most essential attributes. It helps to distinguish the Congolese Other from the white Self, while still making her/him visible and knowable. Notice as well the continuous use of ‘the’ (‘the’ pureblood Mangbetu; ‘the’ Wagenia;...) when talking about local populations, which is a manifestation of the monolithic reasoning present – to a certain extent – in colonial discourse³⁷.

³⁶ *Wagenia Fishermen*.

³⁷ All of this results in films that often invoke the feeling of watching an animal documentary on, say, National Geographic. Inverted to us, it would be to say “the West-Flemish woman has pale skin and long legs” for example.

There is also a considerable emphasis on manual labour across the reels. Although it features in De Boe's films³⁸ as well, it is Ernest Genval's work that stands out in this regard. However, this is mainly because Genval's work, or at least that comprised in the DVD-box, predominantly focusses on all kinds of agricultural and industrial processes, on which I will elaborate a bit later. In *Lovanium* (De Boe, 1959), which is named after a university in the Belgian Congo founded by the Catholic University of Leuven, labour is highlighted to a certain extent. In the beginning of the film, the images show exclusively black workers operating excavators and bulldozers, and mortaring. It is clear from the reels that the heavy lifting was done mostly, if not solely, by the black population of the Belgian Congo. However, the narration seems to make an effort to obscure this fact to a certain extent. Instead of saying "the local workers did this or that", the narrator uses sentences like "in only a few months' time, the excavators and bulldozers had dug up, moved and transported thousands of cubic meters of soil" and "on this mountain, the impressive buildings of the Lovanium university would soon rise". These statements create the impression that this entire process was a rather passive one and did not involve active manual labour, and certainly not labour carried out exclusively by a specific segment of the population. To camouflage this even more, the entire ordeal is described as "the cherry on top of half a century of civilisation history".

In *In 50 Years* (De Boe, 1958), similar examples of what I have just described can be found. Images of black people operating excavators or carrying out other kinds of (manual) labour are accompanied by sentences such as "fifty years later, men from faraway Europe have overcome quasi insurmountable problems", "in a few years, a strong economy has emerged", and "the hardest, but also the most interesting task, was to teach people who stem from a different era everything that took us centuries to learn and what we call civilisation".

Genval's *Gold* (1938) revolves around the extraction of gold in the Aruwimi river, and thus it is not abnormal that there is a focus on manual labour. Again, the images show predominantly black men working in the different phases of the mining process, with white 'supervisors' simply giving orders. The narration, however, systematically ignores their contribution by making the white prospector the subject of sentences.

³⁸ *Lovanium, In the Garden of Brother Gillet, In 50 Years.*



39

Here, a group of black men is digging in a groove to find auric quartz. Because of the poor quality of the image it might not be that clear, but the white prospector is standing at the edge of the groove giving orders and is given whatever the group of diggers find in order to inspect it. Essentially, he isn't doing any of the burdensome labour. However, the accompanying passage to this image is: "often the prospector has to search for gold-containing quartz in crevasses and corridors". Paradoxically, in this same film (and in several others), the local population is commended, often with a sense of amaze, for using 'modern tools': "It is remarkable to see how fast the native workers have mastered these modern working methods".

This focus on manual labour can be considered not only an example of racial fetishism, but also of the differentiated use of stereotypes⁴⁰. The colonised Congolese are evidently just as intelligent as the Belgian coloniser. However, this fact jeopardises one of the crucial differences between the two, namely superior intelligence - especially in *Lovanium*, because it acknowledges the Congolese man's capability of success in higher education. To recover this balance in the advantage of the coloniser, Congolese men are commended for their accomplishments with regard to manual labour⁴¹, thus focusing the attention away from their overall intelligence and onto their bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence, because this is less threatening to the colonial project. Moreover, it is less threatening to the "superiorly intelligent Self". On the other hand, there is often an attempt to obscure the crucial contribution of Congolese manual labour to the modernisation of the Belgian Congo, most likely because overly concentrating on this would take away from the perceived necessity of continuous presence by the coloniser. Essentially, this is a textbook example of the contradictory beliefs and motives inherent to colonial discourse (Hook, 2005).

³⁹ *Gold*, 1min40.

⁴⁰ JanMohamed, 1985.

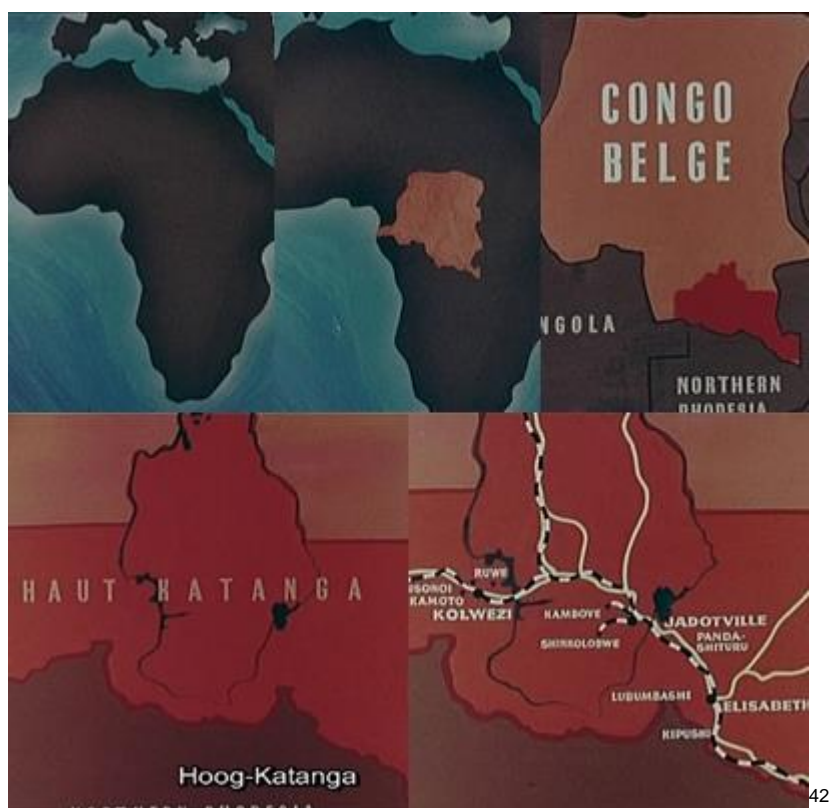
⁴¹And in dance and sports as well.

A successful civilising story?

Another broad theme that can be found across the different reels, which I divide into several subthemes, is the accentuation of the ‘success of Belgium’s civilising mission’ in Congo.

1. Filling in the “gap”

An idea that is clearly present across the different reels is the implied lack of history of the local population. When a certain history *is* ascribed to them, it is presented as one that was cruel and primitive, in need of progress. *In 50 Years* (De Boe) starts with an image of a map of the African continent, which then evolves into a more detailed map of Haut Katanga:



Gradually, the roads and railroads that Belgian civilisation has brought to the area appear on the map. This seems to be an explicit way for the viewer to visualise the ‘modernity’ that comes with colonisation.

When the actual film starts, images of the savannah, animals, forests and local villages and populations are shown. The narrator proclaims that “only in the second half of the 19th century, white explorers penetrated Africa. This area is now called Katanga. For generations, Arab merchants have abused the chiefs. Here they found their pitiable human merchandise”.

⁴² *In 50 Years*.



“Constantly threatened, undernourished, thinned out by disease, ignorant and superstitious”.

Similarly, in *Mangebetu* (De Boe) the narrator points out the ‘tribe’s’ cruel history by calling their ancestors bellicose and cannibalistic.

Clearly, there is a belief, or at least an intention to make the viewer believe (cf. ‘preferred meaning’), that this is what the local population’s history looked like. There’s no mention of the existence of any form of society or economy similar to those in Europe, there’s no acknowledgment of the presence of family life, and so on. In short, anything that the white viewer could relate to her/his own life, in other words to the Self, is left out.

In *Wagenia Fishermen* (De Boe), which follows a tribe of fishermen seemingly untouched by ‘modernity’, the backwardness associated with pre-modernity is also vocalised: “For these people, who cannot write, the traditional dances often illustrate stories about the dangerous fishing in the waterfalls”; “the notables at the head of the various clans... make up a big council... the endless discussions called parlays, which the negroes love so much, revolve mostly around three subjects: the fishery, the fish, or the women”. All of the above seems to

⁴³ *In 50 Years*.

insinuate that the pre/non-modern Congolese people(s) are only concerned with animal-like compulsions: ferocity, sustenance and reproduction.

2. Health

Another aspect one can find across the different reels is the free health care offered to the local population of the Belgian Congo. In *Gold* (Genval), the production team included a segment on health care accessible to the local mine workers. “The mining companies don’t only provide housing for their workers, but food and medical assistance too” the narrator proclaims, followed by images of workers receiving their food rations and of the ‘central hospital’. Similarly, in *From Boma to Tshela* (Genval, 1926), the accompanying passages mention briefly how “the Colonisation is helping to fight sleeping sickness in Mayumbe”.

Contrarily to Genval’s work, in which health care gets only marginal and fleeting attention, De Boe, besides highlighting medical care in *In 50 Years* (1958), *Congolese Sisters* (1958), and *Training Medical Staff* (1955), dedicated an entire mid length film to (the treatment of) leprosy. Initially deemed too pessimistic by the Ministry of Colonies, De Boe adapted *Leprosy* (1938) to display a ‘model village’ for lepers. Before the film begins, the captions announce that “this document has the goal of drawing the public’s attention to a great task which has recently been taken up by the administration of the Belgian Congo, namely the fight against leprosy”⁴⁴. As such, the captions alone allude to the ‘valuable’ work the colonial administration is carrying out in the Belgian Congo. The film itself does not disappoint in that regard either. The spirited, playful voice of the (male) narrator introduces *Leprosy* by describing Congo as a country of great promise, but nevertheless filled with disease. As images of a river and its bank fill up the screen, followed by a group of fishermen rowing, the narration, once again, implies the natural strength of the local population by mentioning leprosy as a continuous threat to “this population, that is yet strongly built”. The infatuation with the black physique is thus never far-off.

The bulk of the film, however, is dedicated to the display of the model village⁴⁵ for lepers. *Leprosy*’s narrative is essentially a celebration of the white medical corps that is said to visit these villages regularly, combined with a morbid fascination for the disease. White nurses⁴⁶ are shown treating victims and white clergymen providing ‘spiritual guidance’. The accompanying narration includes phrases like: “the nurses concern themselves with the fate of these poor, unfortunate impaired people⁴⁷”, “this nurse sincerely has no fear of contamination”, “a ray of hope it is. Visitors are welcome, but even more so are the presents they bring”, “a declaration that speaks of goodness is sometimes just as valuable as medicine”,

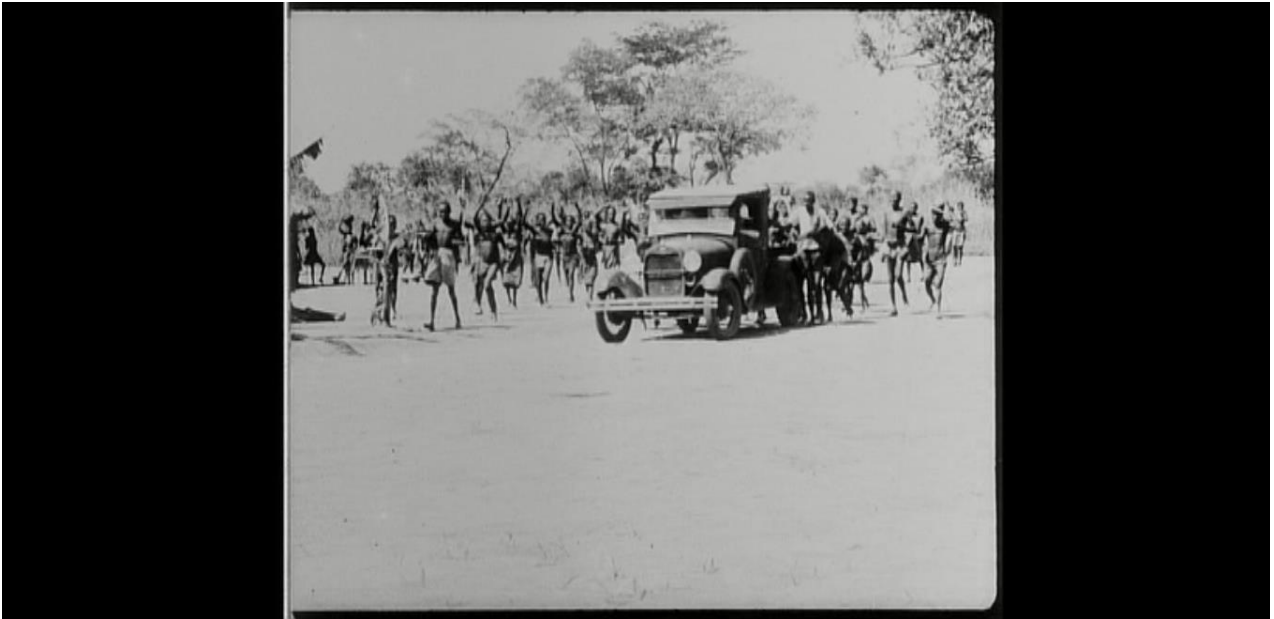
⁴⁴ “Dit document heeft als doel de aandacht van ’t publiek te vestigen op ’n grootsch werk dat onlangs door ’t bestuur van Belgisch Congo werd ter hand genomen, namelijk: de strijd tegen de LEPRA of MELAATSCHHEID.” (Annex I, p.1)

⁴⁵ In the film it is initially called a ‘landbouwkolonie’ (agricultural colony). Later on, the narration explains that it is in effect a sort of village (Annex I, p.1)

⁴⁶ There is a small segment wherein a black nurse is shown treating a patient as well.

⁴⁷ Literally: “zijn het de zusters-verpleegsters die zich bezig houden met het lot dezer arme, ongelukkige sukkelaars” (Annex I, p.2).

and “Yes, the civilised world still has a great task to fulfil here”. At the end of the film, the white visitors are shown leaving the village by car while the residents wave them goodbye en masse, as such emphasising the overall goodness and appreciation of their visit.



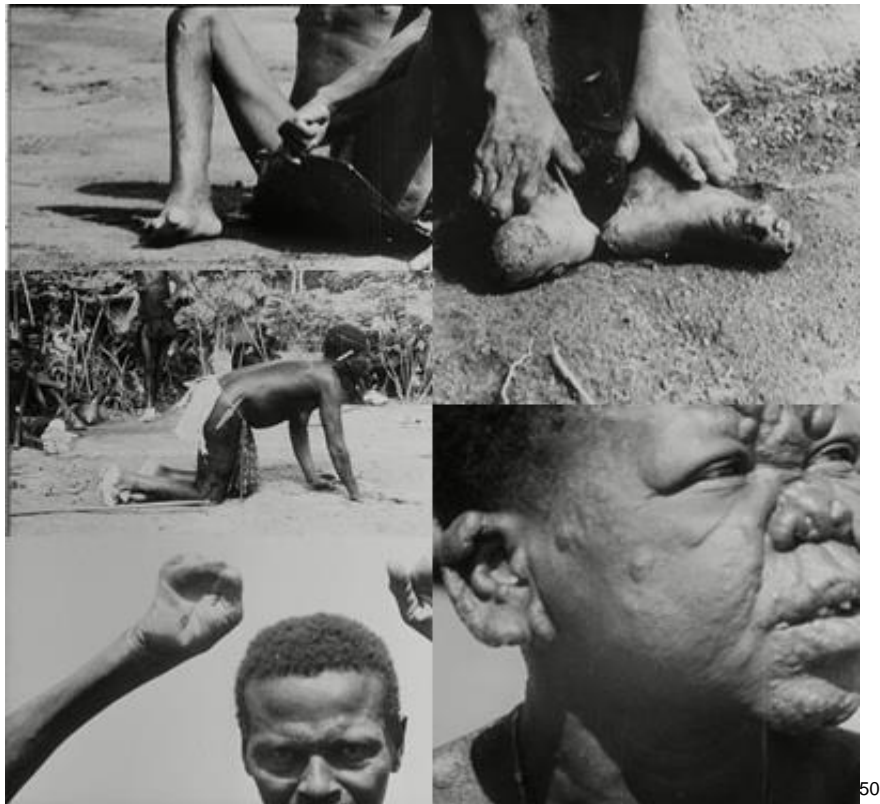
48

The whites shown in the film, the Self, are presented in a manner that implies inherent righteousness and nobility, which is an additional means to justify their presence. Moreover, their ‘purity’ and ‘decorum’ is emphasised by essentially describing them as saviours who are, quite literally⁴⁹, steeped in whiteness, which seems to symbolise this intrinsic purity.

⁴⁸ *Leprosy*, 9min26.

⁴⁹ Dressed in predominantly white clothing.

The residents of the village, however, are presented as sick, animal-like children, and the disease they suffer from is continuously highlighted. The camera fixates on symptoms of the disease relentlessly:



In combination with the excessively merry voice of the narrator, the whole scenario comes across as a sort of spectacle to be enjoyed by the faraway viewer.

“Look at those hands (!). Mutilated, but still not willing to be completely out of work. And as such begins the sad train of bronze coloured martyrs, condemned nolens volens”;

“Some unlucky few must drag themselves forward on all fours like animals. Like sick animals”;

“Poor creatures. The cameraman has asked them to exhibit their mutilated hands, and truly it seems that they gave their consent gladly. Yes, is it not a balm to know that your poor hands can still be of some use?”;

“Nevertheless, one can recognise a human expression on these appalling faces, because even the greatest pains cannot erase inner life. Look at those eyes (!). Pulled back deep into the flesh and yet so profoundly human. Poor masks, formerly faces”.

⁵⁰ *Leprosy.*

These are only a few of the degrading phrases used to describe the images on screen. Even though the narration explicitly *calls* the residents human, there is a noticeable undertone⁵¹ throughout the film which implies otherwise. The coinciding use of the term “creature” and “human”, which is one of the few outspoken manifestations of this undertone, exposes this contradiction. Again, these contradictory states of belief can co-exist through the fetishism as explained above. The stereotype of the Congolese as creatures, which alludes to them being animals, works as a mediating instrument and supplants the threatening difference, whilst still making them a distinct Other. On the other hand, calling and believing them to be human, makes them knowable (and ‘same’).

Further in the film, the residents of the village are shown eating:



52

“The men eat and smoke. And look (!), they are willingly using the equipment that civilisation has brought. The spoon seems rather useful (!);

“Hmmm, tasty it seems (!). Hmmm, yummy food! In spite of all the suffering, of all the pain, food remains not only a necessity, but also a pleasant pastime. Isn’t it good? It looks tasty! Hmmm, what an appetite!”

⁵¹ Which came off to me as simultaneously disgusted and curious.

⁵² *Leprosy*.



“Hoh (!), is that a toothbrush? Yes, with the fingers. Oh (!), they are not rich, but the poor are certainly resourceful⁵⁴”;

“After the meal, a pipe of course. Ooh, that pipe will be tasty (!)⁵⁵ Especially when one has almost nothing else to hope for in life”.

This way of narrating sharply resembles the way one would talk to or about a child and is unmistakably a manifestation of the Belgian paternalistic attitude towards the colonised Congolese.

⁵³ *Leprosy.*

⁵⁴ “Men is niet rijk, maar de arme is meester in zijn hokje” (Annex I, p.3).

⁵⁵ “Na het eten, een pijpje natuurlijk. Ooh, dat pijpje gaat smaken (!)” (Annex I, p.3).

Finally, the allocation of one single emotion to, and the 'natural' predisposition for dance of the village's residents is brought to the fore, again reducing them to what are considered their essential attributes.



Although the narrator alludes to the sadness and misery that comes with the disease numerous times, sombre faces are hardly, if ever, shown. On the contrary, in the last minute or so the images display laughing and dancing women and men⁵⁷.

“No matter how grim the evil and sad the fate, the zest for life remains.”

“Despite everything, the lepers dance. And they smile. Nature does not die out. What a sad masquerade.”

“Rhythm is in the blood.”

Just like the black subjects of many of the other films under consideration, the residents of the village are represented in a way that is clearly instrumental to the needs and prosperity of the colonial system. Even though *Leprosy* is a 'documentary'⁵⁸, implicitly claiming to report reality, it is evident that the images and narration (and sounds) that make up the film are organised in such a way that they articulate and justify the position and aims of the colonialist. By zooming in on one of the weakest strata of the Belgian Congo's black population - the sick -, the colonial

⁵⁶ *Leprosy*.

⁵⁷ The entire display seems rather forced when you watch it. Especially the man on the upper left hand side, who was most likely explicitly instructed to stand in front of the camera and smile.

⁵⁸ "Document" (Annex I, p.1).

project is being legitimised by emphasising the ‘necessary’ help it offers to the ‘poor, sick creatures living in the bush’.

3. Education, housing and infrastructure

I discuss these three aspects together because they are often mentioned together throughout the different reels. In *The Black Elite of Tomorrow* (De Boe), the first sentence of the narration is “the natives of the Belgian Congo are evolving well”, while large groups of black young men are shown entering what I presume is a school. The narrator goes on by praising the proliferation of education across the colony for this positive evolution and explicitly mentions the amount of schools the Belgian government has set up and the number of students attending. As the film predominantly follows an all-boys learning centre in Alberta, the images show the day-to-day activities of these young students. Swimming is one of those activities. At one point in the film, the young boys are shown jumping into a river and playing while the narrator explains that “swimming is extraordinary popular. Especially since the whites have established swimming pools in Congo”. Further in the film, other indications are given as to the civilising and evolutionary role Western-style education and ‘decorum’ has played. For instance, the narrator explains how a student-judged ‘trial’ is another method of shaping the young boys’ character, which is one of the essential objectives that are being pursued in Alberta. The housing provided by the Belgian colonial project is also casually mentioned: “the students live in neat and comfortable cabins”.

In the rest of the film, the 'civilising' effect is implied multiple times as the narrator describes the appearance of the students as flawless and their discipline as impeccable. In that same regard, a sense of order is continuously insinuated by a remarkable number of images of students playing the trumpet, seemingly to announce the start or end of an activity in the centre:



59



60

⁵⁹ *The Black Elite of Tomorrow.*

⁶⁰ ""

Towards the end of the film, the image above (60) is accompanied by the following statement: "As such, Belgium creates within the natives the urge to strive for a more humane existence and a higher life purpose. This is the way it [Belgium] understands its civilising mission in Congo". This sentence does not only allude to the success of the civilising mission, but also implies that before colonisation Congolese people(s) led an inhumane existence.

In *Lovanium* (De Boe), similar insinuations are made as to the good work the colonial project has carried out. The beginning of the film shows how the plateau of the Amba, which was, according to the narrator, bare before the Belgians came, had been transformed into "a busy workshop of feverish activity" and soon became a university complex where "a hundred professors would satisfy the scientific curiosity of young students, African and European". With regard to housing, the narrator explains that most Lovanium students live in institutes⁶¹ and that extensive homes have been built⁶² for them wherein everyone has her/his own room provided with modern comforts. Further in the film, the narrator emphasises the civilising objective through education by stating that the university is not only exposing the students to scientific knowledge and preparing them for their future occupations, but that it "wants to make them full-fledged citizens".

Training Medical Staff (De Boe) contains similar images and narration with regard to the success of the civilising mission in the educational sector. Moreover, the narrator implies that the Belgian colonial project has shown the local population of the Belgian Congo the path to 'righteousness': "The Fomulac, ..., is maybe even more so missionary work. Its acclaim can be attributed for a great deal to the enthusiasm and devotion of the African staff and to the Christian ideal that animates them."

In *In the Garden of Brother Gillet* (De Boe, 1957), brother Gillet, a missionary is honoured for establishing the gardens of Kisantu and for teaching the local population how to farm. "A continuous concern for the gardener of Kisantu was the chronic undernourishment of the blacks" and "...when he set up an agricultural school, the jewel on his crown as a missionary. The goal he pursued with this was making the native familiar with vegetable cultivation". These comments clearly insinuate that before Gillet arrived, the local population was unhealthy, undernourished and would not have survived. The positive educational, knowledge-enhancing effect of the Belgian's (/brother Gillet's) arrival is accentuated when talking about all the goods that are now available to the local population: "a lot of these were completely unknown in Congo before the persistent farmer's son from Palisal came to perform miracles here". The film ends with a reference to the increased prosperity of the local population: "the first piece of land that brother Gillet deforested years ago... contributed to the welfare of the natives, his friends".

Genval's shorter and slightly less packed films refer to the achievements of the Belgian civilising mission as well, although more implicit. As I have mentioned in the subsection

⁶¹ "Internaten" (Annex I, p.11).

⁶² Here again the use of a passive tense.

'Health', *Gold* makes a brief reference to the housing and sustenance provided to the local populations. *The Life of the Waterman* (1938), a silent film which hardly contains any narration, implicitly mentions the arrival of 'modernity' when a white man is shown shooting down a hippo with a rifle⁶³. In *Within the Workfare* (1926), the objective of 'civilisation' is explicitly mentioned at the end: "they are accommodated in small brick houses...until the day they contribute with their labour to the wealth of the country and to the progress of civilisation".

Change in geopolitical interests and attitudes

Although not a theme, the evolution in geopolitical interests and attitudes towards colonisation is pronounced in Belgian colonial cinema as well. Similarly to what Grieveson and MacCabe argue with regard to British empire cinema (2011), the transformation of the Belgian approach towards its colony after WWII is visible in the colonial films under consideration. During and immediately after WWI, mostly the economic aspect is highlighted, while the end of WWII and the gradual awakening of the "Third World" meant a focus on social and medical accomplishments (Vints, 1984). I will illustrate this change concisely by discussing *From Boma To Tshela* (Genval, 1926) and *Lovanium* (De Boe, 1959)⁶⁴.

From Boma to Tshela is a silent film and as such it alternates relatively long images shot in the Belgian Congo with short passages on screen, which are meant to describe what the images signify. In a nutshell, the film follows the Mayumbe railway line that connects the cities Boma and Tshela and showcases several agricultural estates, in which some production processes⁶⁵ are explained in great detail. It is clear that, even though there are some attempts to tone down the apparent domination and subsequent discrimination by whites on screen, the film producer put considerably less effort into concealing the colonial truth than is evident in colonial films after WWII. Although the narrative passages seem innocent, the accompanying reels are anything but that. Numerous images show the local population working arduously, while white male colonists literally stand by, watch and bark out orders. However, the very grim images of colonial reality are accompanied by rather dreary and guiltless passages on screen, which gives the impression that the filmmaker either did not care how the images could be perceived, or that the situations shown on screen were so normalised that it did not matter how they were perceived.

⁶³ "Hippos... When the white man is there...", followed by an image of a white man aiming his rifle and images of a dead hippo being brought to shore and sold by the local population (Annex II, p.8).

⁶⁴ Even though these films deal with entirely different subjects, I chose them because I consider each of them as the extreme on both sides of the spectrum.

⁶⁵ Such as that of cocoa and palm oil.

A remarkable example of a rather half-baked attempt to obscure the excesses of the colonial project is the moment when a Congolese young man is shown operating some kind of kettle “in the factory...”. At first, he seems to look around a bit and into the camera. Suddenly something catches his eye and he anxiously starts working the kettle.



For a split second, you see a white hand appearing from the left hand side on the screen. It is impossible to see what the white man⁶⁷ intended to do exactly. However, the fact that the image is cut before the man’s intentions become clear speaks volumes. I do not profess to be an expert when it comes to editing. It is plausible that they did not have sufficiently advanced technology at the time to edit this more adequately. Nevertheless, they could have just omitted the scene altogether. The fact that they didn’t, in my opinion, demonstrates a certain carelessness and the lack of a felt need to justify harsh colonial actions. This makes (more) sense when situating the film in time (1926). Even though some anti-colonialist movement had started to gain momentum after WWI, it would take until the end of WWII for it to be considerably mobilised. Moreover, social Darwinism was only widely discredited at the end of WWII (“Social Darwinism,” 2018). It is therefore not shocking that little efforts were made in *From Boma To Tshela* to cover up certain activities carried out by a so-called ‘superior people’ in a territory that was internationally accepted to be ‘theirs’.

Contrarily, *Lovanium* tells a completely different story. 1959; the end of the Belgian occupation of Congo was in sight. When watching the day-to-day activities at the Lovanium University, however, one would never guess. Not only the narration, but also the images convey a reality

⁶⁶ *From Boma to Tshela*, 20min18- 20min28.

⁶⁷ Most likely.

wherein white and black (students) live peacefully and amicably together. Even though certain allusions are made to the responsibility the students will have in independent Congo⁶⁸, it is clear that this self-rule was not envisioned to be anywhere in the near future.



69

“In this country, where two civilisations encounter one another, the Lovanium University will be open to both races and create a climate wherein a harmonious cooperation between blacks and whites can be achieved”;

“In the future, they [the students] will look back warmly at these years of intellectual education and enrichment, which will live on in their memory as the best years of their lives”;

“The students come together noons and evenings in the buoyant mess hall to eat and drink collectively ... not only does the university restaurant resemble a beehive, close friendships arise here”;

“... it [the university] is, more than any other institution, a symbol of hope and trust”.

⁶⁸ E.g. “They are aware of the responsibilities they will have to bear in the Africa of tomorrow” (Annex II, p.12).

⁶⁹ *Lovanium*.

Clearly, the images and accompanying narration attempt to paint a picture of the Belgian Congo as a 'model colony', by concealing any conflict and projecting an image of stability. This suggests that the administration sensed the precariousness of its rule (Stanard, 2012), but was not quite ready, if ever, to let it go.

Discussion

All the above clearly illustrates how Belgian colonial films tried to legitimise the colonial project by emphasising the superiority of the Self and the primitivity of the Other. The accomplishments of the colonial project are constantly put in the spotlight, while the effects of the excessive labour demands on the local population and the various manifestations of active and passive resistance are ignored (Vints, 1984). There are several other important themes present throughout the reels (e.g.. the representation of black women in Belgian colonial film, or the lack thereof). However, it is not the objective of this dissertation to provide a comprehensive analysis. Rather, I want to emphasise the fact that these kinds of representation in colonial film existed and were for a long time one of the only accessible channels for information on the Belgian Congo and its local populations. The racist insults that Congo-Belgians still today experience are statements that often connect the colour of their skin to filth, stupidity, inferiority and animality. Following my analysis, it is beyond dispute that these statements originate to a certain extent from the representations provided by colonial propaganda films. The capacity to construct and shape these meanings and representations resided exclusively with the colonial power and its representatives, and evidently painted an incomplete picture. It was the white, male filmmaker, conditioned by the society he embodied, who had complete control over the knowledge and meaning he produced. His *white* perspective dominated that of the colonised because he had the power to speak and as such spoke *for* those who were robbed of that capacity; those who were silenced (Ross, 2010).

Today, or at least up until a few years ago, the bulk of information that the Belgian public at large received about our former colony came from news reports with a neo-colonial tendency, inadequate education on the subject⁷⁰, and the controversial Royal Africa Museum in Tervuren. Essentially, it once more came from a *white* perspective. The last few years, the Congolese diaspora has become more and more vocal - or rather more and more heard (Van der Schueren, 2019). *Kinderen van de Kolonie*, for instance, was one of the first critical Belgian TV series wherein Congolese voices were heard on the subject of Belgian colonisation and its legacy, and has therefore warranted a discussion in this dissertation.

⁷⁰ It is not my intention to reproach educators for this inadequacy because they work with the material (books, etc.) they have. The problem is structural.

Kinderen van de Kolonie (Children of the Colony)

Kinderen van de Kolonie aired from the end of November 2018 until the 1st of January 2019. Every week, Canvas provided the viewer with a 50-minute long episode of the documentary series. The total of six episodes relays Belgian colonial history in an innovative way. Rather than exclusively making use of images on the subject accompanied by voice-overs, the series gives the floor to first- and second hand witnesses of the Belgian colonisation in Congo. Not only colonial history but also its consequences up until today are revealed. Aside from the second, and even third generation of former colonised witnesses having their say, the last episode of the series is entirely devoted to commentaries on and clarifications of structural discrimination and racism today.

The initial architect and director of the series was Sarah De Bisschop. I had the immense fortune of being able to speak with her about the series directly. Because this part of my exploration is less about content and more about the (power)structures and motives behind Belgian documentaries (films) about the Belgian Congo, being able to interview the director was extremely useful. It allowed me to answer three broad questions: a) *who initiated the project and why (now)?*; b) *what did the project team look like?*; c) *what was the goal of the series and was it reached?*⁷¹

Sarah De Bisschop – VRT

Sarah De Bisschop works for Canvas (VRT) on a permanent basis. The idea of *Kinderen van de Kolonie* came up when discussing her former work project, *Kinderen van de Collaboratie (Children of the Collaboration)*, informally with a fellow mother at a primary school gathering. While explaining what she had been working on – letting descendants of collaborators tell their story – the other woman mentioned how many amazing untold stories about important events are out there and how great it is to hear them from people who have experienced them themselves. Incidentally, the woman's grandmother was one of those people: a Congolese woman who had experienced the Belgian colonisation first hand. Sarah was immediately inspired and decided to propose a project, similar to that of *Kinderen van de Collaboratie*, about the Belgian colonisation. Geert Clerbout, editor in chief, and Sarah herself submitted the idea to Canvas and it was approved almost immediately.

The series aired at the end of 2018, which was around the same time the Royal Africa Museum in Tervuren reopened. This was not a coincidence. From the very beginning, the idea was to match the series' airtime with the long-awaited completion of the museum's restoration, which made production quite urgent (they had less than a year). Gert Huskens has designated that

⁷¹ The interview and subsequent transcript were conducted in Dutch. All quotes and paraphrases in the following section were articulated by Sarah De Bisschop, but translated by me into English. The original Dutch version of the (transcript of the) interview can be found in the annexes (Annex III).

period as a tipping point in the Flemish approach towards the former colony (Huskens, 2018). So has Sarah: “I think we may have helped make this tilt possible, but I think we also profited somewhat from the fact that that tilt had already begun”.

When we talked about the fact that this shift did not happen until approximately sixty years after colonisation ended, I asked her why she hadn’t initiated such a project sooner, for instance in the context of the 50th anniversary of Congolese independence in 2010. Her answer was honest, but a clear manifestation of Belgium’s general postcolonial memory: the Belgian colonisation of the Congo, and its consequences up until today, were simply not in her mind. However, unlike many, she was not indifferent to our former colony. She had thought about doing a work project on Congo for years. Nevertheless, when 2010 arrived, the 50th anniversary of Congolese independence completely passed her by.

When discussing the timing of the series further, Sarah said she believed that society was not ready for such a critical approach towards our former colony in 2010 and that the news articles of that time, which she now, with her newly acquired knowledge, recognises as rather nostalgic and neo-colonial, are an embodiment of that reality. Even VRT, which she declares to be filled with critical people, was not spared from the dominant narrative. The fact that Canvas jumped on the project instantly, whereas normally there’s a whole process of drafting and advocating before approving and ordering a project, is according to Sarah another indication that Canvas too felt that society just might be ready for it now: “That tilt, we came just at the right time. Maybe no one would have watched it ten years ago and people would have thought ‘what is this?’”.

Where she is at a loss, however, is the lack of critical voices coming from academia in 2010. In the research process for the series the project team spoke with numerous professors who held considerable knowledge about the subject. “Why didn’t they resist? But maybe they did and their works were never published? I don’t know”.

Surprisingly, even when they *were* approached on the subject by the project team, Sarah claims they strongly advised *against* making such a series. On the first meeting, they called the whole endeavour a “mission impossible” and told the project team it would be “irresponsible” to even try. “This is the default of the academic world. Isn’t it their duty to, if they have all this know-how, to try and get that to the public?”.

Behind the Scenes

As explained above, *Kinderen van de Kolonie* was ordered by Canvas. It was also made entirely in-house (VRT). At the very first production meeting, Sarah proposed to co-produce the series with Congo. Ideally, she wanted it to be a fifty-fifty production and editorial to ensure the team would not be exclusively white. However, her proposal was denied. At the time, there

was a diplomatic uproar between Congo and Belgium, and the production team of the VRT made it clear that they did not want to get involved. Sarah wasn't too happy about this at the time: "Now it's going to come from the white VRT again. That is to say, there are people from other cultures in the VRT, but very few". However, in hindsight she does agree now that the project probably would not have happened (at that particular time) had they tried to work with Congo. Consequently, the entire team was Belgian, and moreover white.

Nevertheless, Sarah claims that they were very much aware of the potential danger of having an all-white team working on a project about the Belgian Congo and that they did try, and succeeded, to remedy this as best as possible: "We carried out an enormously wide search and talked to an insane amount of people. Hundreds of them. We read in, watched documentaries, ... We worked insanely hard those first few weeks".

She does admit that there are still certain pitfalls when working on such a project with an exclusively white team. To ameliorate these pitfalls in the best way, they tried to be aware of them as much as possible and incorporated them in the series itself. Sarah believes that making them explicit and not shying away from them, is already very relevant for the viewer. When I asked her if she could give me an example of such a pitfall, she responded that specialists had advised them not to depict the Congolese people(s) as victims. Because they had pointed that out, they were able to ask the witnesses certain questions, the responses to which were often fantastic stories: "and that became the heart of the series".

Even though the series was produced entirely in-house, according to Sarah, the team spoke with an enormous amount of people: specialists, experience experts, professors,... Therein, they tried to diversify as much as possible: "Different language groups, different universities, different opinions as well. When you put all of that together, the chance of making a more balanced-out programme is at least somewhat bigger".

With regard to the selection process of the witnesses, Sarah claims that the team was very thorough. First, they appealed for witnesses through their own media channels. The response was immense, she says. The editorial office then started to triage these replies based on the content of the telephone calls and emails they had received. As a result, they came up with a long-list of about 200 people. With about 120 of these people, they had very long pre-interviews over the phone and they each got their own file. Out of these files they made an intermediary list of 50 people. These fifty people were visited in person, which eventually led to a short-list of 38 people.

The criteria for triage were numerous. For one, the participating witnesses had to be captivating storytellers:

It's not about talking fluidly. ...we had people who could not finish a sentence. ...If you want your series to work, you [the witness] have to be a bit of a storyteller. It's not about speaking correctly or anything, but about being pleasant to watch.

Another important factor was the balance between black and white witnesses. It was important for the team to have enough white Belgians on the series, as well as enough Congolese and Congo-Belgians. Furthermore, age was an essential criterium. They preferred to have mostly elderly people on the series who had experienced the colonisation first-hand. A meaningful amount of the witnesses are indeed elderly people who experienced the Belgian Congo for approximately twenty to thirty years. Nevertheless, a considerable amount of the Congolese witnesses was relatively young and/or had not lived in the Belgian Congo themselves. I asked Sarah how she felt about the matter, which is evidently connected to the timing of the series: "Yes, it would have been nice if people of 150 years old had still been alive", she responded jokingly. All jokes aside, she admitted to being anxious about this in the beginning. Especially with regard to the first episode, which relays the period of the Congo Free State (1885-1908). However, she feels that all-in-all it was not such a big obstacle:

The oral tradition in Congo is grand. So, these stories are passed on very well and these people tell it in a lived sense. It's really their family history. In that sense, you still got the feeling that you had a sort of direct access to what people experienced then.

However, Sarah also discloses that the youngest Congolese and Congo-Belgians were selected purposely. The project team wanted to reveal the second and even third generation trauma related to former colonisation.

Other relevant criteria were gender and language. They wanted to balance out the woman/man equation and to have an equal amount of French- and Dutch-speaking witnesses. Representing all social 'classes' was also important, but turned out to be somewhat challenging, as the medium through which you try to appeal to witnesses has an influence on the group of people you reach and on the group of people that responds. Having witnesses represent different areas in Congo was also a pertinent criterium, for example: "That's what our specialist also told us, to not only include urban areas, but rural areas as well because the colonisation was experienced differently there".

A last⁷² criterium Sarah mentioned was the need to have enough critical and nostalgic people on both sides, because "both currents exist within both groups". In an unrelated and rather spontaneous moment further in the interview, she described how she visited old Congolese

⁷² She did not mention this last in the interview. For structural reasons I put it last here.

people in run-down houses in Congo, and how these people were so nostalgic for the Belgian period:

You weren't told at all that 'everything was bad', and that is also confronting as a white Belgian. At that time, I had already spoken with an incredible amount of people and I had read so much. So, I had quite some knowledge. ...you can't just walk into a house with your camera and then on top of that explain to them 'but you shouldn't be nostalgic because it was not good'. ...we, white people, former colonisers, need to decolonise, but of course whole generations of Congolese need to do so as well.

Alternative Truths

"I think that a series like this one can help to make the population - these are rather big words but -, to make the population evolve a little bit towards truth". Sarah and editor in chief, Geert Clerbout, had already built up some expertise by making *Kindere van de Collaboratie*. Sarah declares that it was by working on that project that they discovered the importance of bringing oral history on screen. They wanted to let people tell *their* story, even when their opinions were not in line with reality. Similarly to how they approached *Kindere van de Collaboratie*, they let former colonists and colonised speak *their* truth. Evidently, the voice-over on the archival footage gives the viewer the authentic facts, but the idea was to enable the viewers to make up their own minds based on the totality of testimonies. Even though formal colonists were heard as well, an important objective was to give a voice to Congolese people: "I had never seen a programme on Belgian television wherein people from Congo were able to talk for a long time and wherein they got to do it entirely from their own point of view".

A burning question I had since the series aired was why it was not shown on Eén, the more generic branch of VRT, instead of Canvas. When Sarah expressed to me that they wanted to help the public along towards the truth, I wondered even more whether Eén wasn't a better channel to do so⁷³. She responded that it never really entered her mind to air the show on Eén, and that she thought of it as a typical Canvas series. Moreover, she believes that if they had made the series for Eén, they would have had to approach it differently:

You can make a lot more informative things on Canvas. Now we could really afford to show a whole chunk of archival material with quite a lot of info, fairly complex info.... With Canvas you can set the bar high. Whilst on Eén, on Eén I think you would get some sort of interference of the executives who are afraid and wonder 'is the audience wide enough?'

As such, she does not believe that this series, which was rather critical, could have been made for Eén. They would have had to make it differently, and consequently, although she does not

⁷³ Viewing rates are a lot higher on Eén than on Canvas.

say it in these exact words, it probably would have lost some of its value. Nevertheless, even though viewing rates for Canvas are perpetually lower than those for Eén, those of *Kinderen van de Kolonie* were still immense. Not only the viewing rates were great, but Sarah feels that they reached a larger public beyond the spectators of the series as well:

The impact has been enormous. ...in all the magazines, all the newspapers, all the radio shows, other tv programmes, everyone was talking about it. We also won the Ensor for best documentary that year and so on. So, yes it was Canvas, but I think it was picked up by a vastly wider audience than just Canvas.

She also mentions that they got a lot of reaction from schools and teachers who were at a loss with their history syllabi and had now started to show the series in class. Teachers are obligated to dedicate a number of classes to colonial history, but the provided learning material hardly touches upon Belgian colonisation. Having done in-depth research herself in the context of producing the series, Sarah understands how much effort it takes to really immerse yourself in the subject and believes that teachers should not be expected to do so on their own initiative:

It has to be handled - that's the problem - it has to be handled structurally. There have to be good textbooks on every level.... Then, I am sure, all teachers would grab these with both hands and would be happy to teach about it.

Anyhow, Sarah is of the opinion that, even though the series had an impact that should not be neglected, there is still a lot of work to be done in changing the overall narrative towards our former colony. When I asked her about the backlash of the series in 't Pallieterke⁷⁴ for example, she laughed and said: "You could feel that it [the series] stung in certain old-colonial spheres".

Discussion

Kinderen van de Kolonie was an innovative series mostly in the sense that it included Congolese and Congo-Belgian perspectives on the Belgian colonial project and its aftermath. Moreover, a lot of effort was clearly put into making the programme as balanced and thorough as possible. Overall, it was an admirable attempt at offering alternative representations of our colonial past and its pawns, which is to be celebrated. However, without questioning Sarah De Bisschop's intentions or motives, which I believe to be genuine, several criticisms can be made.

Firstly, even though the series was intentionally made so that the airtime would match the re-opening of the Royal Africa Museum, this time frame had certain implications. Because of the diplomatic uproar between Belgium and Congo at that time, for instance, it was impossible to co-produce the series with Congo, which made it an *all-Belgian* production. Moreover, the series was made completely in-house. Unfortunately, however - and this relates not only to

⁷⁴ A weekly magazine for Flemish-nationalist and right-wing conservative purport.

Kinderen van de Kolonie but to the VRT in general - 'in-house' in this case meant *white*. Even though white was not the all-pervading colour *on* screen, it certainly was *off* of it. Following the insights of continental film theory, I suggest that the meanings the series conveyed are closely related to the context in which it was produced and the mode of expression, which are in their turn influenced by the cultural and institutional framework that confines them. It is therefore not misguided to assume that the end-product might have looked differently had it been co-produced with Congo. Furthermore, it seems to me that production was rather hurried⁷⁵ in order not to miss the 'decolonisation train'. As mentioned in the beginning of this dissertation, the concept of 'decolonisation' was everywhere that period; it was a "hot" topic. The danger is that the timing of the series might have led to a feeling of contentment and loss of responsibility; the belief that 'we are now decolonised'. The fact that the former hot topic seems to be cooling down might be an indication of the truth of this assumption.

⁷⁵ Moreover, Canvas approved immediately.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation has explored how documentary films on the Belgian Congo produced by Belgians reinforce the persistent prejudice towards Belgian citizens of Congolese descent and forestall a substantive postcolonial debate in Belgium. By analysing Belgian colonial films through a postcolonial lens, I have disclosed how film was a medium to legitimise the colonial project by proliferating a particular kind of knowledge about the Belgian Congo and its local population ('preferred meaning'). Simultaneously, I have revealed how these representations are a manifestation of the Belgian-Congolese Self/Other dichotomy and what purposes they served. By discussing audience theory and several scholars who have critically examined empire cinema, I have illustrated the belief among several academics that audiovisual media have a certain impact on their audience - although there are many disagreements on the extent of that impact. Whatever that extent, I have illustrated that several preferred meanings as encoded in Belgian colonial film, still live on today. Congo-Belgians today are confronted with insults associating the colour of their skin to a lack of intelligence, equating them to animals, etc. Following my analysis, these are undoubtedly statements that can be traced back to colonial film and the representations in it.

As to the lack of a substantive public debate, and keeping the impact of preferred meanings in mind, I suggest that the depiction of the Belgian Congo as a 'model colony' in Belgian colonial film has influenced the felt need for a debate. The dominant narrative of the Belgian colonisation where idealism and civilising are considered the leading objectives is clearly present in the films under consideration. Colonial film was one of the only sources of information about the Belgian Congo and its residents for a long time, and have since then hardly been countered by alternative, disproving information accessible to the wider public. In 2010, Cinematek - and several other actors who hold substantial knowledge about the subject for that matter - had the opportunity to oppose the dominant colonial truth and sensitise the public about the power of (filmic) representation with the release of the DVD-box *Belgisch Congo Belge*. However, a truly critical and awareness-arising commentary was not included. The lack of unequivocally contradicting information is in my opinion a potential reason why the emergence of a substantive debate was hindered for such a long time. Why would one feel the need to discuss or even consider the former colony when 'we've done mostly good things there'?

Eventually, it would take until the end of 2018, with the re-opening of the Royal Africa Museum and the release of the series *Kinderen van de Kolonie*, to open up a more widespread debate around our former colony and its lasting consequences. *Kinderen van de Kolonie* was an admirable attempt at giving a voice to the Other perspective but was not without flaws. As has been made clear through the examination of the colonial films and filmmakers under consideration, the films were produced and presented from an all-white perspective. The colonialist filmmaker and the society he embodied had complete control over the

representations in it; the Other was literally and figuratively silenced and had no influence on how s/he was presented. Differently, in *Kinderen van de Kolonie*, Congolese and Congo-Belgians *did* have the opportunity to speak and therefore had some influence on how they were presented. Unfortunately, and similarly to colonial filmmaking, the production team, again, was completely white. In the end, the power to determine what the *complete* picture looks like resided once more with white Belgians. In other words, the voice of the Other was present *on* screen, but it was again silent *off* of it. Although director Sarah De Bisschop made it known to me that it was not possible to co-produce with Congo due to circumstances beyond the production team's control, the all-white project team still exposes the lack of diversity *within* the VRT. This could imply the pervasiveness of institutional racism in the Flemish public broadcaster as well, but such a conclusion requires further investigation. Moreover, following the insights of continental film theory, I believe that the meanings conveyed through the series are closely connected to context and mode of expression, which are in their turn influenced by the cultural and institutional framework that confines them. It is therefore not deluded to suggest that the end product might have looked differently, had they succeeded to co-produce with Congo or had the production team been more diverse.

I conclude by pointing out the rather fleeting attention for a topic that was only last year a "hot" one. This seems to suggest that the reconstruction of the Royal Africa Museum and the release of *Kinderen van de Kolonie* implies the complete 'decolonisation' of our society and the acquittal of responsibility. This would be misguided to say the least. Important steps have been taken, but their reward might be eroded if Congo is no longer persistently part of the picture. As I have aimed to make clear through my analysis, film and audio-visual media in general, considering their daily consumption, have the capacity to influence popular views. The institutions that control them (cf. Cinematek or VRT) have an impact on what information reaches the public at large. Therefore, I believe that it is partly up to media channels such as VRT to present the picture as complete as possible and to keep putting this important issue in the limelight, thereby possibly initiating further debate. An important way to ensure this outcome is to 'decolonise' and diversify the VRT and similar institutions themselves. The composition of such an institution (cf. the absence of cultural diversity in the VRT) has an influence on the representations it produces (cf. the provision of stereotypical depictions of certain populations without sensitising arguments; Cinematek), and those same representations have an influence on the eligibility (cf. racism because of certain depictions) to be part of that institution. As it is more difficult, or even impossible, for the subject of certain prejudicial representations to change these without being part of the institution, it is up to the institution to transform them.

Reflection

The research conducted in this dissertation is not sufficient to answer the proposed research question decidedly. However, this was not the objective. The goal was to gain insights into the power of colonial and postcolonial visual representations and the institutions that produce and provide them. My research is limited by the fact that I have only analysed a restricted number of Belgian colonial films and that those films were included in a DVD-box, which means that I did not look into the archives myself. It is therefore not possible to make conclusions about Belgian colonial cinema in general. However, I do believe that my analysis of this limited amount of films sufficiently demonstrates how colonial filmmakers and the society they embody tried to legitimise the colonial project through specific representations. The unravelling of certain themes that could be found across the reels, is a case in point. The fact that I did not dive into the archives myself is another limitation, because I might have found other films that are of significant importance for this dissertation or that might have given me a more varied view of Belgian colonial cinema. However, it also provided me with an opportunity: it was now possible to also consider the institution which released the discussed colonial films, namely Cinematek. Furthermore, it offered me a modest possibility to correct myself. If I had looked into the archives myself, I might have had the tendency to omit certain films that were not consistent with my own expectations (confirmation bias). With regard to the interview I conducted with Sarah De Bisschop, similar limitations present themselves. I cannot make conclusions about the line of thought of other members of the production team, nor can I make conclusive judgements about Canvas or the VRT in general. The interview did, however, give me an insight into the composition of the project team of the series, and implicitly of the VRT. Furthermore, it gave me an important understanding of Sarah's personal motives for the series and her evolution while working on it, which is in my opinion a reason to be cautiously optimistic with regard to the 'decolonisation' and diversification of the Flemish public broadcaster in the future.

As this dissertation has been of an exploratory nature and does not provide conclusive answers, I recommend further research into the Belgium's collective postcolonial memory and the influence of the media therein (see: questions proposed in b) Research purpose). Moreover, I recommend more Belgian scholarship on the subject written (or translated) in English, which would make attempts at comparative studies including other former colonial powers more achievable and overall accessibility greater.

The contribution of this dissertation is plural. Firstly, it contributes to the (critical) Belgian scholarship around our former colony, which is not that extensive. Secondly, because it is written in English, it makes broader access to that scholarship possible. Thirdly, as described in the beginning of this dissertation, there is still a lack of theoretical discourses on film which include a postcolonial study of cinema, even though both postcolonial theory and film studies concern themselves immensely with the field of representation. By observing Belgian colonial cinema through a postcolonial lens, I have engaged with this theoretical gap and revealed

deliberate and often contradictory filmic representations, which served a specific purpose and live on today. Lastly, I aimed to disclose information which could potentially aid in bringing about a substantive public debate, by, among other things, revealing that even a critical series like *Kinderen van de Kolonie* is not without flaws and that its release does not mean that our society is now 'decolonised'. However, I am aware that this dissertation is in fact an 'academic text' written by a mere student and will therefore not reach the wider public. Nevertheless, I hope that it can be an inspiration for other students who share my thoughts on the importance of this issue, and on its worthiness of further attention and study. Only by subjecting it to continuous analysis and consideration, does it have a chance of gradually becoming an acknowledged and prominent concern in Belgian society.

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