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Epistemic Disobedience

Through Prisms

Practice-based Research on the Intentions of Collaborative Filmmaking

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commentary by Rosine Mbakam



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Through Prisms

Practice-based Research on the Intentions of Collaborative Filmmaking¹

An van Dienderen, Natalie Gielen, Eléonore Yaméogo and with a
commentary by Rosine Mbakam

PRISM and this article are part of the research project “China Girls and the Color Genie. A multichronotopic research” from 2015 till 2019, and the following research project from 2020 onwards initiated by Dr. An van. Dienderen at KASK / School of Arts Ghent and generously funded by the University College Ghent Research Fund, VAF, the Flemish Audiovisual Fund, and Beursschouwburg Brussels.

Challenging the White-centricity of Film

- ¹ Issues of power and race in film studies are generally discussed through the finished products (films) and the relation to their contexts. By contrast, this contribution wishes to further such analysis by exploring the context of the process of creation of film (van. Dienderen 2017a ; 2008 ; 2007 ; 2003). In this article we write about our urgency to create the film *PRISM* ; the theoretical background to formulate the subject of the film ; parts of its process of production with an insight into our ethical code of production ; the invitation to work with other filmmakers ; the production of the first scene ; the problems of facing our own Eurocentric frame of reference and the proposed alternative method of collaboration. The finished film is expected in the Spring of 2021².
- ² This article, therefore, offers “only” a snapshot of the process of making *PRISM* without at any point establishing its final meaning. We see a parallel with how the anthropologist Johannes Fabian looks at translation:
- ³ “Translation is a process ; the texts we call ‘translations’ are but documents of that process. They, too, are produced through contingent events – in fact, they may in turn be regarded as rehearsals and performances – and are therefore never definitive” (Fabian 1990: 99).

- 4 Similarly, this article can be regarded as a “rehearsal or a performance”, and is “therefore never definitive”. The question arises as to when a film process is ever really complete. Even when the film is finished, its meaning and relevance change with different audiences, different receptions and different cultural contexts. As such, thinking about the importance of the film process as a critical site, reveals a never-ending practice following the mediated interactions between its main agents: the maker, the subject and the viewer within a context of a “technology of seeing” (Winston 1996 in van. Dienderen 2008). This article can thus be described as investigating “meaning in action”, as anthropologists Marcus and Fischer proposed (1986: 85) to deal with “cultural mediations that occur through film and video works” (Ginsburg 1991: 94).

The Use of Vaseline in Lighting Techniques

- 5 The film *PRISM* departs from the perspective that the photographic media are technologically and ideologically biased, favoring Caucasian skin. Such white-centricity means that the photographic media assume, privilege and construct whiteness. Scholars such as Richard Dyer (1997), Brian Winston (1996), Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (2003), Lorna Roth (2009) and An van. Dienderen (2017a) claim that Caucasian skin is used as the standard reference for photographic media, so that people, who do not conform to this implicit norm, are filmed in a distorted way.
- 6 The film *PRISM* follows organically from An van. Dienderen’s previous work in which she explores issues that start from a certain social urgency which she intertwines with a form that questions dominant formats. In *PRISM* this social urgency is the relation between skin color and light, which is a logical continuation of her previous film *Lili* (van. Dienderen 2015). *Lili* is about the tradition of so-called “China Girls”: white women who are filmed with a color chart.

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- 8 These images are historically used in films since the 1920s to calibrate the colors of the camera. The problem with this tradition is that the white skin is used as an (invisible) standard, making it more difficult to visualize people with a different skin type (van. Dienderen 2017a). *Lili* is situated in a TV studio where the set dresser is asked to serve as a so-called China Girl. This re-enactment questions, as a film-in-a-film, the practice of white “China Girls” in order to problematize the relationship between film processes and ideology.

Figure 1. Set photo *Lili*

Photo by Lisa Spilliaert

- 9 It was striking that after each screening of *Lili* questions from the audience arose about how people with a different skin color deal with this built-in racism. "Are there any other types of 'China Girls'?" ; "Are there other color correction processes?" ; "How do people with a different skin type cope with this unconscious racism?" van. Dienderen failed in answering these questions, but she found them to be very urgent and pertinent. She then did research of other forms of "China Girls". She only found one image of a dog with a color card, one image of a veiled woman with a color card and one of a wedding couple. These were the proverbial exceptions to the rule, making her quest seem like a dead end.
- 10 Then she read a very interesting article in the Washington Post about the Howard University in Washington, the only Historically Black College/University (HBCU) in North America that offers a master's program in film to students of color. Film students not only study practical knowledge of chemistry and camera techniques but also learn that African-American culture is political. The school was formed in 1975 when a group of African-American filmmakers formed the collective L.A. Rebellion group, started by the Ethiopian filmmaker Haile Gerima. At Howard, students learn how to film the diversity of black skin through the latest techniques in digital film procedures. It is a particularly successful school, where, for example, Bradford Young graduated, the DOP of *Arrival* by Denis Villeneuve (2016).
- 11 Montré Aza Missouri, a filmmaker and teacher at Howard University, recalls that a teacher in London instructed her: "If you find yourself in the 'unfortunate situation' of shooting on the 'Dark Continent', and if you're shooting dark-skinned people, then you should rub Vaseline on their skin in order to reflect light" (Hornaday 2013). At that time, she was not taught to question the technology herself. In her own courses at Howard University, however, she teaches her students that the tools of cinema and the science on which they are based are not racially neutral. In contrast to the bizarre

Vaseline advice, she chooses to make her students aware of the racial bias and encourages them to deal with it in a creative way. Inspired by how Howard University challenges the racial bias of cinema, the following questions became the engine of *PRISM*: How can the medium that favors a white skin type be used to show people of different skin types in a poetic and political way? How can filmmakers with different colors of skin be together in one frame? And how can we create a common film on this topic?

From Chromophobia in the West to White Privilege

- 12 These questions are also inspired by the work of anthropologist Michael Taussig and the artist David Batchelor who argue that the West is characterized by chromophobia (Taussig 2009 ; Batchelor 2011(2000) ; van. Dienderen 2017a). Taussig argues that the uneasiness that Europeans display in relation to color manifests its allegiance with Orientalism in such a way that colonialism can be regarded as a tension between chromophobes and chromophiliacs: “[I]s not color the product of a colonially split world in which ‘man in a state of nature’, as Goethe would have it, loves vivid color, while the Europeans are fearful of it?” (2009: 131). Artist David Batchelor agrees that a fear of corruption through color exists within Western thought (2011). He writes that color is pushed out of our culture because it is associated with the 'foreign' body: usually the feminine, the oriental, the primitive, the childlike, the vulgar, and the sick... (Batchelor 2011: 22-23).
- 13 Such a bias regarding color can also be found in the "Whiteness" Film studies. According to film scholar Daniel Bernardi, "Whiteness" is the representation and the (usually invisible) narrative form of Eurocentrism built-in since the beginning of cinema (2008: XV). Media critics Ella Shohat and Robert Stam also define "Whiteness" as "the process by which race and ethnicity are attributed to others while whites were tacitly positioned as invisible norms" (2003: 3). The title of *PRISM*, incidentally, is derived from a quotation from Daniel Bernardi:
- Hollywood functions as a sort of prism, refracting the colors we see on cinematic screens by separating them from whiteness. Misrepresenting whatever is seen through it, Hollywood attempts to segregate whiteness from color in ways that make the former invisible and stereotypical (Bernardi 2008: XV).
- 14 Taussig and Batchelor perceive a general unease with color in the Western world and connect this with its colonial history. This theme is explored in the "Whiteness" studies about how Eurocentrism and the standard of whiteness in film are constructed, represented and maintained. Ann Hornaday from The Washington Post writes:
- For the first hundred years of cinema, when images were captured on celluloid and processed photochemically, disregard for black skin and its subtle shadings was inscribed in the technology itself, from how film-stock emulsions and light meters were calibrated, to the models used as standards for adjusting color and tone. That embedded racism extended into the aesthetics of the medium itself, which from its very beginnings was predicated on the denigration and erasure of the black body (Hornaday 2013).
- 15 Video artist and filmmaker Steve McQueen, who made *12 Years a Slave* (2013), said: "I remember growing up and seeing Sidney Poitier sweating next to Rod Steiger in *In the Heat of the Night* and obviously... it's very hot in the South. But also he was sweating because he had tons of light thrown on him, because the film stock wasn't sensitive

enough for black skin” (Hornaday 2013). Professor of Cinema Studies Richard Dyer confirms in his book *White* (1997) that lighting techniques of film has racial implications. The aesthetic technology that is used presupposes and privileges the image of white people.

- 16 It is a small step to switch from these “Whiteness” studies to the discourse on white privilege. Actor and writer Anousha Nzume extensively describes that privilege in her book *Hallo witte mensen (Hello White People)* (2017), inspired by anthropologist Gloria Wekker’s *White Innocence* (2016). White privilege is the entire set of institutionalized unearned benefits that white people have access to. The technological advantage that white people enjoy in illuminating their skin color is such an undeserved advantage. The question then is how we as white filmmakers can deal with this white privilege. We found inspiration in the recent issue of *Rekto:Verso*, a Flemish journal on art and culture, which was entirely dedicated to decolonization³. In it, the dramaturge Tunde Adefioye of KVS (The Royal Flemish Theatre Center of Brussels) wrote a controversial piece that he named *The ten steps plan for the arts sector* (Adefioye 2018: 56-58). The fact that he recommended white “cis males” in their sixties to start their exit plan evoked a lot of indignation from the relevant target group. He advised artists and cultural workers to open up the canon, to have the white institutions occupied by people of color on their terms, to engage different voices from various communities and to crack the quality code of a monocultural reference. This edition of *Rekto:Verso* has put these suggestions into practice by having the number written almost entirely by people of color, who have entered the pages of the issue on their terms. It is this way of working that we want to continue while creating *PRISM*.
- 17 Semiotician Walter Mignolo inspires this line of thought so as to call into question the modern/colonial foundation of the control of knowledge:
- I have been supporting in the past those who maintain that it is not enough to change the content of the conversation, that it is of the essence to change the *terms* of the conversation. Changing the terms of the conversation implies going beyond disciplinary or interdisciplinary controversies and the conflict of interpretations. (2009: 4).

Decolonization of the Documentary Form

“Cadavre exquis” or Exquisite Corpse as a Decolonial Option?

- 18 We are convinced that the theme of *PRISM* should not take the form of a didactic or classical narrative (mainstream) documentary. Such documentaries are often indebted to a normative discourse that is at odds with the questions we want to explore in *PRISM*. Despite the socially committed or critical attitude many (documentary) filmmakers take, documentaries often underpin a large-scale epistemological enterprise that is closely linked to the project of Western colonialism (Steyerl 2011). According to artist and media theorist Hito Steyerl (mainstream) documentaries often criticize unfair power structures on the content level, but fail to do so with regard to form. By invariably using authoritarian or explanatory strategies, these films imitate the aura of the courtroom seeking to separate right from wrong: “On the content level, many documentary articulations seemed to erode or even attack unfair power structures. But on the level of form, by relying on authoritative truth procedures, the conventional

documentaries have intensified the aura of the court room, the penitentiary or the laboratory” (Steyerl 2011).

- 19 Experimenting with formal strategies, such as collaborative and self-reflexive filmmaking, offers ways to challenge mainstream ideologies (Balsom and Peleg 2016). Unlike mainstream filmmakers, we argue for embracing documentary as a form that puts the *messiness* of the-reality-on-screen at its heart. The documentary format involves a complex mix of representation, performative interactions between maker/subject/viewer, and a reflection on what reality could mean in this context. It continuously questions the relationship between the creation of images and the paradigm (of philosophical reality) it relates to (van. Dienderen 2017b).
- 20 The relationship between skin color and exposure in film is a socially critical subject ; but if we take Steyerl's advice seriously, we must treat this subject in a form that decolonizes and which deconstructs imbalanced power structures of cinema. Crucially, we do not want to assume what it is like to have a different skin color to ours. We therefore do not want to make a film *about* filmmakers with a different skin color. In order to experience the ways they have developed to deal with the racial bias of (lighting) technology in cinema, it is necessary to make a film *with* them. We wish to collaborate with filmmakers who have a non-white / different skin color than ours and whose work reveals an interest in the theme, where politics of skin color intertwine with the aesthetics of cinema.
- 21 To perform collaborative filmmaking An proposed the system of “cadavre exquis” (“exquisite corpse”), the surrealist collective game that was invented in 1925 by Marcel Duhamel, Jacques Prévert and Yves Tanguy to enhance subconscious and playful art creation. The original exquisite corpse or rotating corpse is a method by which a collection of words or images is assembled. Each collaborator adds to a composition in sequence, either by following a rule or by being allowed to see only the end of what the previous person contributed. You probably remember the principle of a cadavre exquis from your childhood. You drew a head, folded the paper until only the two lines of the neck were visible and passed it on to your neighbor, who drew the continuation. In a group, the most imaginary figures were created. That was also the intention of the French surrealists, who wanted to stimulate the subconscious and imaginary during a cocreative process.
- 22 The choice for working with a cadavre exquis is also linked to the subject of *PRISM*: Sociologist Lorna Roth has been studying the relationship between racism and technology, both in color television, color correction maps in photography, and in everyday objects (patches, ballet shoes, etc.). She confirms that film and photography generally regard white skin both technologically and ideologically as a norm. Roth comes to the conclusion that this racial bias, and this white standardization, are characterized by a kind of technological unconsciousness:

My research confirms strongly that in photographic industries of visual representation, a White, gendered reference point has been central to the thinking and decision-making about film design and practice.

This “flesh tone imperialism” typifies an aspect of the technological unconscious—an apparent lack of awareness of the dominance of Whiteness in the cognitive patterns of those key people framing the tools of visual reproduction by decision and design. It informs us significantly of the need to recognize how deeply embedded in our cognitive processes the naturalization of Whiteness and sexism remains (Roth 2009: 125-126).

- 23 It is because of the importance and the impact of this technological unconsciousness that An proposed to work with the form of the *cadavre exquis*. With this game and its resulting collaboration, we aim to create a film that is in line with Mignolo's definition of epistemic disobedience:

Epistemic disobedience is necessary to take on *civil disobedience* (Gandhi, Martin Luther King) to its point of non-return. Civil disobedience, within modern Western epistemology (and remember: Greek and Latin, and six vernacular European modern and imperial languages), could only lead to reforms, not to transformations. For this simple reason, the task of de-colonial thinking and the enactment of the de-colonial option in the 21st century starts from epistemic de-linking: from acts of epistemic disobedience (Mignolo 2009: 15).

- 24 Fully aware of our privileged position as white European filmmakers, we want to use that privilege and the funding that we can attract to share it with filmmakers with a different skin color than ours. We underscore Mignolo's transparent analysis that the West has since long held "epistemic privilege of the First World. In the three worlds of distribution of scientific labor, the First World had indeed the privilege of inventing the classification and being part of it" (Mignolo 2009: 8). This privilege can also be found in the art world, where uneven power differentials are grounded in a Eurocentric canon. As one commission member of the Flemish Audiovisual Fund (where we apply for funding) symptomatically remarked: we (Natalie and An) are perceived as a guarantee for a certain quality when dealing with this "risk" of collaborative authorship. Mignolo therefore asks to take on the decolonial option: "If you engage in the de-colonial option, ... then you engage in shifting the geography of reason - in unveiling and enacting geopolitics and body-politics of knowledge" (2009: 14).

Multichronotopic Invitation of Filmmakers

- 25 Initially, we had set out to work together with African filmmakers. A commission member of the Flemish Audiovisual Fund noted that the problems we want to raise exceed the African continent, which is indeed the case. For this reason, we have chosen to frame the filmmakers with whom we work under the heading: filmmakers with a non-White/different skin color than ours (An and Natalie) whose work reveals an interest in the theme. This is obviously a huge group of people. It is important not to step into a neo-colonialist trap here. To this end, we want to connect different makers, places, media and styles to create a decolonizing synergy, or to put it in Mignolo's words: a geopolitical collaboration. This focus on the inclusive is in line with the concept of the multichronotopic, which makes connections between different places, styles and ethnicities. The word offers an alternative to multiculturalism and was defined by media researchers Ella Shohat and Robert Stam to describe the possibilities of cinema:

Cinema embodies the inherent relationality of time (chromos) and space (topos); it is space temporalized and time spatialized, the site where time takes place and place takes time. The multi-track nature of audio-visual media enables them to orchestrate multiple, even contradictory, histories, temporalities, and perspectives. They offer...multiple channels for multifocal, multiperspectival historical representation (2003: 37-38).

The Production Process of *PRISM*

Figure 2. Set photo of the scene by An van. Dienderen for *PRISM*



Photo by Thomas Nolf

Ethical Code of Production

- 26 We consider the systematic inequality of power relations during filming processes to be the starting point for reflection about documentary film. Because of these power differentials, the documentary gesture always involves an ethical responsibility; and thus aesthetics in documentary film practice is continually connected to ethics. The engagement with which a documentary filmmaker relates to a subject becomes an ethical engagement, because s/he transforms that subject into an image (van. Dienderen 2008). As Stuart Hall already announced, cinema is the place where identities are formed, and not simply reflected or imitated (1989: 80). Precisely because of this identity formation, ethical questions have to be raised systematically when reflecting about the documentary gesture.
- 27 Given this perspective on documentary filmmaking but also given the specific theme of the film, we developed an ethical code of production. The collaborative process of *PRISM* across borders and privileges raises questions such as: How do we avoid the neo-colonialist pitfalls in which unbalanced power relations between Western Europe and other parts of the world resonate? How do we ensure that there is no discrepancy between on the one hand the co-authorship that the cadavre exquis initiates and on the other hand the coordination of the financing, development, production, post production, and presentation by the filmmaker and its producer?
- 28 To this end, we have assembled a reflection group that follows the project. It consists of Orlando Verde (filmmaker from Venezuela, living in Antwerp and connected to Kif Kif – an intercultural movement in Antwerp that fights for equality and against racism),

Nina de Vroome (Dutch filmmaker, living in Brussels, contributor to *Sabzian* – a cinephile’s guide for Belgium and its surroundings, offering a mainly Dutch language platform for writing on cinema and image culture), Ann Overbergh (Director of *Kunstenpunt*, Flemish Expertise centre for performing arts, music and visual arts, living in Brussels), Moya Michael (South African choreographer, actress *PRISM*, living in Brussels) and an African-American dramaturge (who wants to remain anonymous, but has relevant expertise in the matter). With this continuous reflection on the ethical code, we want to ensure that the creative process corresponds to the political potential of the project. In the remainder of this chapter, the feedback from this reflection group will regularly appear.

Creating the “First” Scene

- 29 Thanks to the development support of the Flemish Audiovisual Fund and the research fund of KASK School of Arts Ghent, An and Natalie were able to record the first scene of the film. We thought this to be a crucial step in realizing the *cadavre exquis*. However, one of the members of the reflection group warned us that in doing so we were not only deciding the frame of reference (the choice of working with a *cadavre exquis*), but we were also putting ourselves as white film directors at the beginning of the project, spearheading its direction. Yet at that moment, we thought it was vital for us to start so that our first scene could help to find interested filmmakers but also to attract the necessary funding. These reasons, we later found out, seem now at odds with our intention of making a decolonial film project, but we will come to that later on in the article.
- 30 This first scene is directed by An, and recorded in KASK with actors Moya Michael and Jeroen Perceval. It consists of an uninterrupted plan sequence starting in the courtyard of the campus and leading to the film department. These travel shots glide further through the corridors to the large, dark film studio where a film set has been created, which scantily illuminates the two actors. The set shows a living room with objects. Everything is painted gray, except for a small color bar here and there – as if it was a color test scene. Initially, the lighting is technical, after which the lighting sensitively scans the limits of the possibilities to film a woman of color and a white, bald man within one frame. Sometimes the man is bleached out; sometimes the woman disappears into the dark.
- 31 Almost immediately, we decided to make a continuous shot of ten minutes in which all the elements of the scenario came together within one performative sequence. This decision ensured that we had to work out a comprehensive choreography. The intention was that the actors had to “act” from the beginning of the shot. They had to come across as authentic, so that the boundary between acting and not acting becomes deliberately vague.

Figure 3. Still of the scene by An van. Dienderen for *PRISM*



PHOTO BY AN VAN. DIENDEREN

Flow Between Fact and Fiction

- 32 The way in which the first scene was filmed is in line with *Cherry Blossoms* (2012) and *Lili* (2015), made by An van. Dienderen, in which she is mixing documentary and fictional codes. The reason why we are interested to work with the documentary gesture is that it is characterized by a very fascinating paradox: the very moment you want to film reality it escapes, vanishing into thin air, mutating (van. Dienderen 2017b). It is precisely this paradox that opens the door to an endless range of possibilities. For us, documentary departs from a social, geo-political, body-political or personal urgency so as to break up formal conventions and formatting. Documentary is an endless interrogation of the relationship between the creation of images and the paradigm of reality to which it relates. In mixing codes and conventions from documentary and fiction, new forms open up, with a high degree of self-reflexivity, which incorporates the process of making film as part of the film itself. Filmmaker and theoretician Trinh T. Minh-ha has influenced this perspective when she writes: "A documentary aware of its own artifice is one that remains sensitive to the flow between fact and fiction" (1990: 89).
- 33 An example of this mixture of documentary and fictional codes: The 45-year-old actress Moya Michael plays the role of the woman. She comes from South Africa and has told us that she was labeled "colored". In the period of Apartheid, that was apparently a different category from "black" or "white". The rights attached to these labels increased as the hue of the skin lightened: the whiter people had the most rights, the blacker the least. The so-called pencil test assessed these labels: a pencil was turned into the hair of the person concerned. If the pencil remained in the hair, the person was labeled as "black" ; if it fell from the hair, he/she was a "colored" person. Moya has

experienced this as a child. This biographical story is incorporated into the (fictional) dialogue between the actors.

Figure 4. Set photo of the scene by An van. Dienderen for *PRISM*



Photo by Thomas Nolf

Interweaving Technology and Ideology

Barns burnt down
 Now I can see
 the moon
 --Mizuta Masahide

- 34 This inspiring haiku by the seventeenth-century Japanese poet Masahide is a linguistic counterpart of what we aim for with the visual style of the first scene. In the conceptualization of the set it was important that the skin of the actors would be pronounced. That is why we decided to build an integral gray decor, in which all details and all the elements were painted in monochrome gray. This monochromy was only broken by the subtle application of color bars and gray scales. Next we investigated how we could elevate the set. This was important in order to create an alienating arrangement, which clearly breaks with the documentary, realistic framework of the previous images of the courtyard.
- 35 During the preparation of the shoot, Director of Photography Léo Lefèvre showed us how powerful the spectrum of some 16mm celluloid is in filming people of different skin color. Digital video cannot always handle this wide range of skin colors. It is for this reason that we decided to film on two media simultaneously. The main camera is the 16mm camera and shows the scene without major technological problems to film a white, bald man next to a woman of color. At the same time as the 16mm camera is filming, a video camera is used to instantaneously reproduce the scene. This is very useful when working with 16mm, because you can normally only see the images after

development. Thanks to this video feed you can immediately view what you have filmed. We have connected this video feed to a recorder so that these images are also recorded. You can watch these video images on a separate link (see below). After recording the plan sequence, when viewing set photos and filmed footage, we realized that despite the interesting plan sequence we also had to film some close-ups of the set, as it looked incredibly fascinating. We therefore organized a reshoot one week later. Meanwhile ants had found their way to the fresh fruit in the decor, which was painted with paint. These ants created an atmosphere of decay that we think fits very well with the images, and which gave the close-ups more dynamism. As Orlando Verde pointed out, these close-ups also underline the cinephile reference to surrealist films, such as *Un Chien Andalou* by Luis Buñuel (1929), thanks to the ants.

Figure 5. Set photo of the scene by An van. Dienderen for *PRISM*



Photo by Claire Stragier

36 Here you can watch the three Vimeo links we created:

37 - The first is the plan sequence, the uninterrupted shot filmed on 16mm.

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Video link = <https://vimeo.com/269684215>

39 The second link shows the close ups of the set.

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Video link = <https://vimeo.com/269682964>

- 41 The third link shows the images of the video feed, which were filmed simultaneously with the 16mm camera.

- 42 This media file cannot be displayed. Please refer to the online document <http://journals.openedition.org/anthrovision/5931>

Video link = <https://vimeo.com/269717694>

Figure 6. Still of the scene by An van. Dienderen for *PRISM*



Still by An van. Dienderen

Invitation of Filmmakers

- 43 Inviting filmmakers to collaborate is a crucial aspect of the project. We have followed up contacts in numerous film festivals, film schools, and specialized networks, with researchers, filmmakers, curators and so on. The reflection group emphasized that the invitation should primarily bear our personal signature, so that our authorship would resonate in the choice of the makers. We therefore want to work with filmmakers: 1. whose work interests us; 2. who have a different skin color to ours (Natalie and An); 3. who have a sensitivity to the subject and the type of films that An makes.
- 44 We had conversations with several filmmakers and the following two filmmakers agreed to collaborate with us: Paris based filmmaker Eléonore Yaméogo from Burkina Faso was trained in the film school of Ouagadougou (ISIS-SE, Institut Supérieure de l'Image et du son / Studio Ecole). Eléonore has made both fiction short films and documentaries. She recently finished a feature length documentary about her personal relationship with missionaries in Burkina Faso, to tell a story about (de-)colonization, *Le cimetière des éléphants* (2018). Eléonore Yaméogo belongs to the younger generation of African female filmmakers who like to explore daring subjects while also looking for a new African aesthetic, which is supported by her diaspora experiences.

- 45 Brussels based filmmaker Rosine Mfetgo Mbakam grew up in a traditional family in Cameroon. She chose film very early on and was trained in Yaoundé, thanks to the team of the Italian NGO COE (Centro Orientamento Educativo), where she was initiated in recording strategies, editing and production from 2000 onwards. In 2007, she left Cameroon and signed up for a course at the film school INSAS (Institut National Supérieur des Arts du spectacle et des techniques de diffusion) in Brussels. She realized *The Two Faces of a Bamileke Woman*, her first documentary, which she released in 2017, with which she attended many international festivals such as IFFR, the New York Africa Film Festival, etc. According to her own statements, she has already been confronted several times with the difficulties of the medium to portray a dark skin color. She therefore welcomes the challenge to give her perspective on the subject in *PRISM*.

Figure 7. Set photo of the scene by An van. Dienderen for *PRISM*

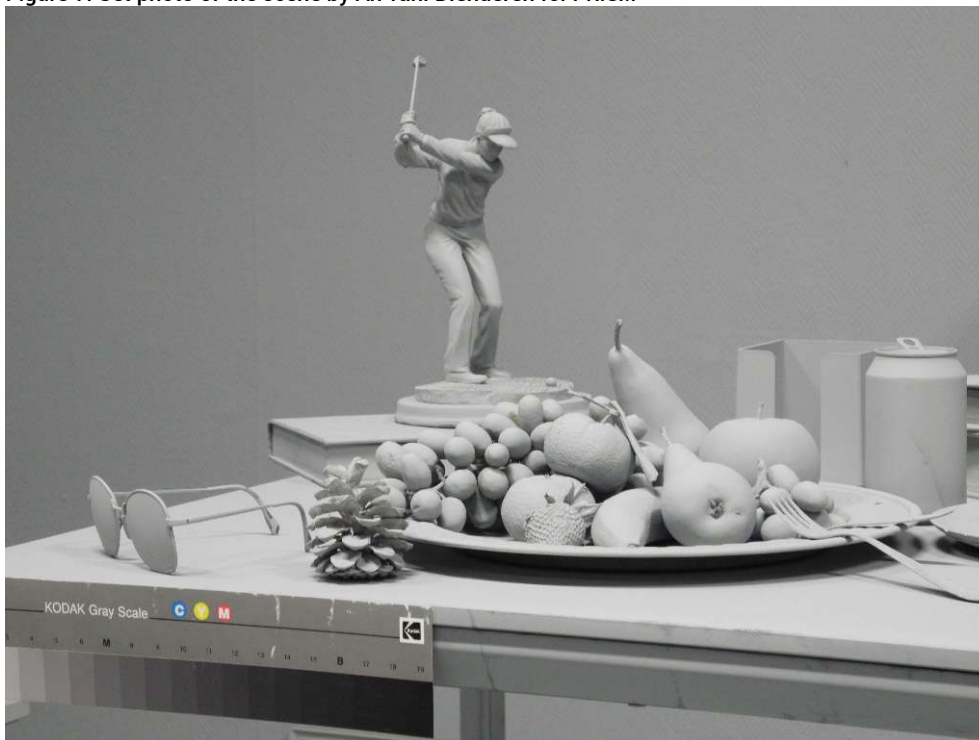


Photo by An van. Dienderen

The Problem of the Cadavre Exquis

- 46 As already mentioned, An proposed the cooperation in *PRISM* to be based on the principle of the cadavre exquis. The first scene she had filmed was taught of as the starting point of the cadavre exquis. There have already been some cinematic predecessors who worked exquisitely with this format: Apitchatpong Weerasethukul's *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000) is a cadavre exquis. He interviews people on his journey through Thailand and asks them to tell the story that unfolds from meeting to meeting. The maker creates a form of self-reflexive co-authorship, but still maintains authorship to a large extent – including his interventions in sound, the intermediate titles, and the choice of narrators and their contexts. According to Laurent Van Lancker, the cadavre exquis format is very suitable for researching intercultural dialogue. He applies this in his film *Surya*, realized in 2006 with Florence Aigner. The choice for a cadavre exquis

arises from their search for the imaginary potential of storytelling. They traveled overland from Belgium to Vietnam and asked storytellers who met them on the way to unfold the story about Nemo. The story was improvised along the way and came about within the triangular relationship between the storyteller, a creative assistant translator and Van Lancker. He oversaw the macrodramaturgy and the connection between the different narratives, but he seldom intervened on the spot.

- 47 The *cadavre exquis* in *PRISM*, as proposed by An, takes over the self-reflexive character of Weerasethukul, and the traveling of images from *Surya* and *Mysterious Object at Noon*, but differs from them. The main difference is that we do not want to work with storytellers in the conventional sense, but with filmmakers who will each work out a scene. Initially, the plan was to forward the first scene to the various filmmakers, and ask them to film a sequel. This was partly motivated by the fact that this would speed up the procedure. Then the filmmakers could work simultaneously on their part and An van Dienderen would finish the edit of the film. However, we received the comment from the reflection group that this would yield a very vertical film in which we would fully determine the format. This would be very contrary to the circular starting point of the project to integrate the perspectives of the filmmakers in an autonomous way. We then have determined that the first scene made by An will be passed on to the second filmmaker. The scene of the second filmmaker is passed on to the third person, without them being able to see the first scene.
- 48 As mentioned earlier, we want to ask the other filmmakers to take this focus on lighting as a starting point for their follow-up to this first scene. How do they use light as a sensory tool to explore skin, emotion and politics? How do they use the medium -- which favors a white skin type -- to show people of different skin types in a poetic and political way? The total film is then realized by putting the four finished scenes together.
- 49 But when we invited Rosine Mbakam and Eléonore Yaméogo in Ghent for the first time, the conversation went in a completely different direction. We had already mailed the scene by An to Eléonore. Rosine hadn't seen it, as we thought she would only see the scene that would be made by Eléonore before making her scene, a procedure we had proposed based on the rules by the *cadavre exquis*. But during that meeting Rosine and Eléonore raised essential questions regarding the format of the *cadavre exquis*. We discussed an entire day, and by the end of the day we understood that the *cadavre exquis* was totally unfit for the collaboration of the film. We realized that it was another perpetuation of the Eurocentric frame of reference. Although we had conceptualized our project based on a theoretical discourse on decolonization and the help of the feedback group, we had failed to see that collaboration starts at the beginning of the project. We should have invited our collaborators first and then decide together which format to use for the film. The *cadavre exquis* was so attracting especially for An, as it bears this political potential, which seems vital for the project. But the fact that only An had proposed it, and she is a white Belgian filmmaker again perpetuated the colonial type of film production in which the white European determines the type, method and direction of the film.
- 50 As Walter Mignolo writes:
- My humble claim is that geo- and body-politics of knowledge has been hidden from the self-serving interests of Western epistemology and that a task of de-colonial thinking is the unveiling of epistemic silences of Western epistemology and

affirming the epistemic rights of the racially devalued, and de-colonial options to allow the silences to build arguments to confront those who take 'originality' as the ultimate criterion for the final judgment (2009: 4).

- 51 From that day we skipped the format of the *cadavre exquis* all together and choose to envision *PRISM* as a chain letter, interweaving scenes made by the three filmmakers in dialogue with each other. We also understood during our conversations that the three filmmakers relate differently to the topic of the film. Rosine's scenes are mostly autobiographical. She interviews two former film professors of hers. These scenes are interwoven with a reenactment of the painting *Portrait de Nègresse* by Benoist and culminate in an attempt to film herself, her white husband and their son in one image. Eléonore's scenes are more narrative: she films actress Tella Kphomahou, talking about problems she encountered with the lighting of her skin. Tella has conversations with a director of photography of color on this topic, and with French-Senegalese director Alain Gomis. Furthermore, recorded zoom conversations are edited throughout the film in which the directors discuss their viewpoints, and the making of *PRISM*.

Ending a Performative Process

Should I not simply leave the account at the end of the play and let readers draw their own conclusions?... The problem boils down to this: How can this book be ended without canceling its purpose, which was to tell the story of a process of search for the meaning of [statements about] power? It seems to me that this can be done only by taking the process into a newer cycle, making room for a new story (Fabian, 1990: 259).

- 52 This article tackles issues we face during the production process of the collaborative film *PRISM*, while the film is yet unfinished. As Fabian argues, this gesture is by definition incomplete and therefore it is quite impossible to come up with a conclusion which would seal off the dynamics of the production process. What we did in this article is to highlight what our intentions are: *PRISM* uses the convention of color test scenes as a starting point to look into cross-cultural practices of cinematography and their relation to 'color quality control' processes. It wishes to create multichronotopic links between different geographical, cultural and historical groups by working with filmmakers of different skin color and who are from different parts of the world (Shohat and Stam 2003). With *PRISM* we want to explore the poetic and emotional register of light in its relationship with skin color, together with filmmakers who have a non-white skin tone.
- 53 However, the initial idea of working with a *cadavre exquis* format was proposed by the Belgian, white film maker and showed her Eurocentric frame of reference, which was refused as inappropriate by the other filmmakers. Instead a chain film format was chosen together so as to invite each filmmaker to present her own point of view on this highly personal subject.
- 54 In this article we have presented the theoretical background and our intentions of starting *PRISM* yet also our challenges and mistakes, demonstrating that despite our knowledge of a decolonial discourse in practice we were backfired by our own Eurocentric frame of reference. Whether these intentions will be successfully carried out in the final film is up to a following phase, "a newer cycle". We invite you to join the premiere of the film, which will be released in the Spring of 2021⁴.

Figure 8. Set photo of the scene by An van. Dienderen for *PRISM*



Photo by Thomas Nolf

On the Way to My Decolonization by Rosine Mbakam

- 55 Discovering that the camera had been created with only the white skin as a reference puts me face to face with my own naivety of the colonized. I was trapped in a system where, as a black filmmaker, my main working material discriminated me. The project *PRISM* followed my first three feature-length documentaries. In these films, I experiment and research my gaze cinematographically. I was born in Cameroon, a country colonized by France. I was already carrying this colonial heritage in me without being conscious of it and without questioning it. I asked myself who I was and what I considered belonged to my singularity and my history, which was mostly a construction and a result of a dominant and Western ideology. The project *PRISM* allowed me to do an introspection and to look in my history as to what had not been influenced by this colonial past. *PRISM* became first of all a laboratory, where I could diagnose all that I was ruminating in silence, then a platform where, as a black filmmaker, I could share my thoughts, my resistance to this ideology, its power and everything that it unconsciously deposited in me. I finally had the space to confront myself to it.
- 56 Questioning this technological discrimination allowed me to assimilate it to other forms of discrimination. I retraced the journey of a young student who was working on her graduation film. She had to reproduce in image the famous painting "*Le portrait de la Négrresse*" by Marie Guillemine Benoist. This is the first time she filmed black skin and its complexities. It is also the story of my decolonization. I am confronted with my own cinematic colonization as a black person and a woman. I question my place and my gaze as a colonized person in a film school and in a society, where Western cinema

dominates and influences other forms of cinema. I make a genealogy of my colonization through the history of Africa and the representation of black people.

Figure 9. Photo of the opening scene by Rosine Mbakam for *PRISM*



Photo by Tristan Galand

Figure 10. Photo of the opening scene by Rosine Mbakam for *PRISM*



Photo by Tristan Galand

Voiceover Excerpt (1) from the Film *PRISM*

It's the big day
 she is beautiful ready to get married
 With innocence, with purity
 But where is her husband? He has no face.
 She looks ahead with certainty, ignorant of what awaits her.
 It is the big day, the day of this forced marriage,
 this arranged marriage with the greatest of this world as guests

Drooling, in front of its beauty, its richnesses...
 She is beautiful and ready to give herself with confidence and naivety.
 But where is her husband? She has never seen him.
 He has no face but decides for her.
 She doesn't understand everything but accepts it all the same
 Each pact builds its own pain.
 Under her dress her chained feet
 under her petticoat her gaping wounds
 under her panties flows the blood of her murdered rebellious children.
 But she is beautiful, always generous and patient.
 Waiting to see one day the face of her husband, of her killers...
 Yet it is there, invisible but powerful
 acting with strength without compromise
 I was born from her belly
 I carry his legacy on my face
 I am black
 I am colonized
 I carry this poison within me.

- 57 Collaboration with the other directors takes place in a confrontation of ideas. It highlights our fragilities. I discovered a complex, that pushed me to reproduce and conform to "a story" of Africa, of the African and of the Black. We are constantly looking for a way of working that is liberating for each one of us. We are vigilant in reproducing pre-existing schemas. These schemas have long been certainties for each other. It is not easy to question our certainties. We are aware of the importance of the work to be done so that the film is faithful to the reflections, discussions and questions we have. It is necessary and important for us that the spectator can find in the film some tracks of reflection. When we question ourselves, it's not always nice to see what comes out of it. It's not nice to hear or see what I discovered in me and that I tell in the film. This process has allowed me to vomit it all up, without a filter. I found there a voice of emancipation and a liberation of my gaze. I hope that the viewer will find a way to decolonize as well.

Voiceover Excerpt (2) from the Film *PRISM*

I am Madeleine. I was called! It is written so it is true.
 My story began when it was written.
 I am the Venus Hottentote.
 But who was I before this name was given to me?
 What do you know about my story, about my mysterious body, about the woman?
 And my story, the one before I had this name: The Venus Hottentote.
 Does she exist? No! It is not written.
 And I, who am here before you today, who am I?
 Give me a name! A story! Write it down.
 What have I lived in this decor far from my origins?
 I leave it up to you to imagine it.

Figure 11. Photo of the third scene by Rosine Mbakam for *PRISM*



Photo by Rosine Mbakam

Figure 12. Photo of the final scene by Rosine Mbakam for *PRISM*



Photo by Tristan Galand

Figure 13. Photo of the fourth scene by Rosine Mbakam for *PRISM*



Photo by Geoffroy Cernaix

- 58 In this quest for decolonization, I realize how difficult it is to deconstruct an ideology when there are not many of us who think it needs to be deconstructed. Sometimes it feels like you're always a disruptive element. It's exhausting. But the urgency is bigger and the need is greater.

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NOTES

1. When we started to write this article it was as early as the Summer of 2017 when we were just looking for co-directors for *PRISM*. Now, at the date of its publication, the film nears its completion. The article was thus written at the start of the collaboration of the film. At that point Natalie and An were the only persons working on the project. That is the reason why it was submitted by only the two of us. When we received the news that the article would be published in the summer of 2020, we invited the two co-directors to be part of this article. Rosine Mbakam wrote a commentary at the end of the article. Eléonore Yaméogo replied to be co-author.
2. For the moment you can find info on the project on the website of An van. Dienderen: <http://www.anvandienderen.net/prism-2019/> (accessed August 17, 2020). We will soon develop a website entirely dedicated to *PRISM*.
3. <https://www.rektoverso.be/dossier/C2Xp2dLPh5y3jqw39> (accessed August17, 2020)
4. For the moment you can find info on the project on the website of An van. Dienderen: <http://www.anvandienderen.net/prism-2019/> (accessed August17, 2020). We will soon develop a website entirely dedicated to *PRISM*.

ABSTRACTS

This article deals with the production process of the film *PRISM*. Belgian filmmaker An van. Dienderen invited Brussels based filmmaker Rosine Mbakam from Cameroon and Paris based filmmaker Eléonore Yaméogo from Burkina Faso to collaborate. Our skin color serves as a departure to explore our different experiences with the bias of the cinematographic medium, which favors Caucasian skin. An van. Dienderen proposed the system of “cadavre exquis”, the surrealist collective game. But this is a Eurocentric frame of reference, set by a white film maker, and backfired during the start of the collaboration. We therefore changed the format of the film

in a chain letter, in which each filmmaker is invited to present her point of view. *PRISM* thus wishes to create multichronotopic links between different geographical and cultural groups so as to put the decolonial call by Walter Mignolo (2009) for epistemic disobedience into practice.

Cet article traite du processus de production du film *PRISM*. Le cinéaste belge An van Dienderen a invité la cinéaste Rosine Mbakam du Cameroun, installée à Bruxelles, et la cinéaste Eléonore Yameogo du Burkina Faso, établie à Paris, à collaborer. La couleur de notre peau sert de point de départ pour explorer nos différentes expériences avec le biais du support cinématographique, qui favorise la peau caucasienne. Une camionnette. Dienderen a proposé le système du "cadavre exquis", le jeu collectif surréaliste. Mais il s'agit d'un cadre de référence eurocentrique, établi par un réalisateur de films blancs, et qui s'est retourné contre lui au début de la collaboration. Nous avons donc changé le format du film en une lettre en chaîne, dans laquelle chaque cinéaste est invitée à présenter son point de vue. *PRISM* souhaite ainsi créer des liens multichronotopiques entre différents groupes géographiques et culturels afin de mettre en pratique l'appel décolonial de Walter Mignolo (2009) à la désobéissance épistémique.

Este artículo trata sobre el proceso de producción de la película *PRISM*. El cineasta belga An Dienderen invitó a colaborar a la cineasta Rosine Mbakam de Camerún (residente en Bruselas) y a la cineasta Eléonore Yameogo de Burkina Faso (residente en París). Nuestro color de piel sirve como punto de partida para explorar nuestras distintas vivencias con el sesgo del medio cinematográfico, que favorece la piel caucásica. An propuso el sistema del "cadáver exquisito" (cadáver exquisito), el juego colectivo surrealista. Pero este es un marco de referencia eurocéntrico, establecido por un cineasta blanco, y fracasó durante el inicio de la colaboración. Por lo tanto, cambiamos el formato de la película en una cadena de cartas, en la que se invita a cada cineasta a presentar su punto de vista. *PRISM* desea así crear vínculos multi-cronotópicos entre diferentes grupos geográficos y culturales para poner en práctica la llamada decolonial de Walter Mignolo (2009) para la desobediencia epistémica.

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Palabras claves: centralidad de lo blanco, estudios sobre lo blanco, cine documental, práctica fílmica descolonial, cocreación, cine colaborativo

Mots-clés: le «blanc» comme épigénètre, études sur la blancheur, film documentaire, pratique cinématographique décolonisée, cocréation, cinéma collaboratif

Keywords: White-centricity, Whiteness studies, Documentary film, Decolonial film practice, Cocreation, Collaborative filmmaking

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