



# PRISM

A FILM BY ELÉONORE YAMEOGO - AN VAN. DIENDEREN - ROSINE MBAKAM

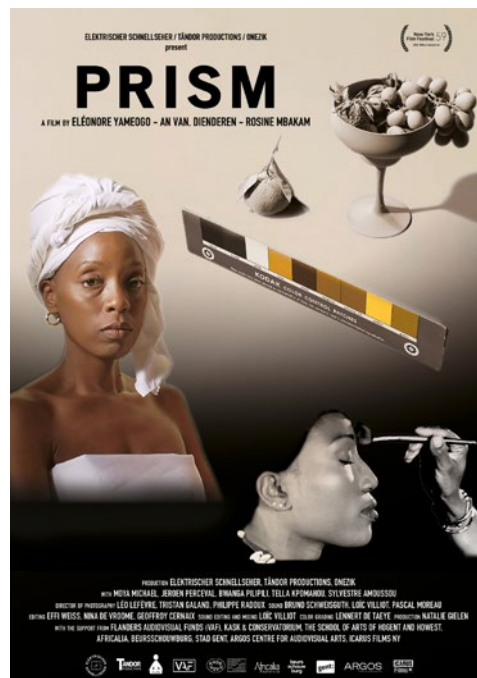
**PRISM is a co-creative film in the form of a chain letter, directed by three filmmakers with different skin tones. PRISM problematizes the neutrality of the camera and its inequality of power to tackle other inequalities in society based on skin color.**

## PRESS KIT



# SYNOPSIS

For *PRISM* Belgian filmmaker An van. Dienderen invited Brussels based Rosine Mbakam from Cameroon and Paris based Eléonore Yameogo from Burkina Faso to make a film in which the differences in their skin color serves as a starting point to explore their experiences with the limitations of the medium. Photographic media are technologically and ideologically biased, favoring Caucasian skin. Such white-centricity means that the photographic media assume, privilege and construct whiteness. *PRISM* problematizes the objectivity of the camera and its inequality of power to tackle other inequalities in society based on skin color.



Watch the trailer here:  
<https://vimeo.com/575743863/407938ff37>

# TECHNICAL INFORMATION

ORIGINAL TITLE:

**Prisme**

ENGLISH TITLE:

**Prism**

DURATION:

**78 min**

LANGUAGE(S):

**English and French**

SUBTITLES:

**Dutch, French and English**

PRODUCTION:

**Elektrischer Schnellseher, Tândor Productions & Onezik**

REALISATION:

**Rosine Mbakam, An van. Dienderen, Eléonore Yameogo**

PHOTOGRAPHY:

**Léo Lefèvre, Tristan Galand & Philippe Radoux**

MONTAGE AND EDITING:

**Geoffroy Cernaix, Nina de Vroome & Effi Weiss**

SOUND:

**Bruno Schweisguth, Loïc Villiot & Pascal Moreau**

SOUND MONTAGE:

**Loïc Villiot**

CALIBRATION:

**Lennert De Taeye**

PRODUCTION:

**Natalie Gielen**

With support of: Flanders Audiovisual Fund (VAF), KASK & Conservatorium, the School of Arts of HOGENT and Howest, Africalia, Beursschouwburg, the city of Ghent, ARGOS center of audiovisual arts, Dr. Guislain Museum

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

For *PRISM*, Belgian filmmaker An van. Dienderen invited Brussels based Rosine Mbakam from Cameroon and Paris based Eléonore Yameogo from Burkina Faso to work together on a film in which the differences in their skin color serves as a starting point to explore their experiences with the biased limitations of the medium. Photographic media are technologically and ideologically biased, favoring Caucasian skin. Such white-centricity means that the photographic media assume, privilege and construct whiteness.

**How can we, three filmmakers with different skin colors, be together in one frame? And how can we create a common film on this topic?**

We envision *PRISM* as a chain letter, interweaving scenes made by the three filmmakers in dialogue with each other. Rosine's scenes are the most personal. She interviews two former film professors of hers about their focus. These scenes are interwoven with a reenactment of the *Portrait de négresse* 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 Diarra Sourank, a director of photography of color on this topic, and with French-Senegalese director Sylvestre Amoussou. An's scenes are more abstract. They are shot at the film school where she teaches. The scene travels from the school's yard to a studio, where the setting evokes a color test scene, portraying a white man and a woman of color.

Additionally, recorded Zoom conversations are edited throughout the film in which the directors discuss their viewpoints, and the making of *PRISM*.

*PRISM* creates powerful counterimages in a co-creative flow that connects documentary and fictional codes, to question the issue of racism in Western film making. The film problematizes the neutrality of the camera and its inequality of power to tackle other inequalities in society based on skin color. While the film deconstructs these issues, it also tries to reconstruct by creating a film in a collaborative manner.



## THE STARTING POINT OF *PRISM*

The film *PRISM* derives organically from Belgian film maker An van. Dienderen's previous film *Lili* (2015). *Lili* is about the tradition of so-called "China Girls": white women who are filmed with a color chart. 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 tone. *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.

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?" An failed in answering these questions, but she found them to be very urgent and pertinent.

That's when An invited Brussels based Rosine Mbakam from Cameroon and Paris based Eléonore Yameogo from Burkina Faso to work together on a film in which the differences in their skin color serves as a departure to explore their experiences with the biased limitations of the medium.



# BIOGRAPHIES



Eléonore Yameogo



Rosine Mbakam  
© Jean-Dominique Burton



An van. Dienderen  
© Lisa Spilliaert

## Eléonore Yameogo

Originally from Burkina Faso, Eléonore Yameogo, belongs to a generation of female African directors, eager to tackle demanding film subjects. Her career began on the film sets of Ouagadougou, where she acquired field experience, before studying cinema in Burkina Faso, Belgium and France where she currently lives. *The Elephant Cemetery* and *Paris My Paradise* are her two most recent films and deal with existential issues between Africa and the West.

In 2006, she directed her first short documentary, *Ouaga Jazzy*, about the life of an old jazzman. In 2007, in the continuity of the previous one, she completed her second short film, *Ouaga HH*, also related to music. The same year, during a stay in Belgium, Eléonore discovered that in Europe, there are also 'garibous', a term used in Burkina Faso to designate beggars. From this observation she has made a medium-length film, *La main tendue*, in official selection at Fespaco 2009.

After her meeting with the French producer Erwann Créac'h at the Festival Afrique taille XL in March 2008 in Brussels, she collaborated with him for the production of her first feature-length documentary film, *Paris mon Paradis*. *Paris Mon Paradis* premiered at Fespaco 2011 and won the prize of the Superior Council of Information (CSI). A series of awards followed the same year. In 2017, she began directing *The Elephant Cemetery*

produced by Vrai Vrai Films (France) and Onezik (Burkina Faso). This film was selected for Fespaco in 2019 in the category feature documentary competition. FESTICAB in Burundi and FIFIREL in Cameroon awarded the film as the best documentary film at their 2019 edition. In addition, the film received the Special Mention of the jury at the Festival Ecrans Noirs in Cameroon.

## Rosine Mbakam

Rosine Mbakam grew up in Cameroon. She chose cinema very early on and trained in Yaoundé thanks to the teams of the Italian NGO COE (Centro Orientamento Educativo) where she was introduced to image, editing and directing in 2000.

She collaborated and directed several institutional films for this structure before joining the team of STV (Spectrum Television) directed by Mactar Sylla in 2003. During 4 years, she accumulated different positions of editor, director, presenter, responsible for the programs.

Driven by the desire to develop her cinematographic vision, she joined the Belgian INSAS (Institut National Supérieur des Arts du Spectacle et des Techniques de Diffusion) in 2007. Graduated in 2012, she directed a first short fiction film *You will be my ally*, which was awarded by several international festivals.

In a desire for independence, she founded Tândor Productions in 2014 with Geoffroy Cernaix. By producing her films, she seeks to defend the singularity of her vision. She directed *The Two Faces of a Bamileke Woman*, her first feature documentary in 2017 which was selected in more than sixty festivals (IFFR Rotterdam, Fespaco...). Her next film *Chez jolie coiffure* had an even wider audience (Dok Leipzig, True/False, AFI Fest Los-Angeles, Fespaco...) Both films were widely critically acclaimed (New-Yorker, New-York Times, LA Times, Variety...)

In order to develop cinema in her country Cameroon, she founded the production company Tândor Films in 2018. At the same time, she initiated Caravane Cinéma, which ensures the screening of African films in the working-class neighborhoods of Cameroon's major cities as part of open-air screenings. She now seeks to perpetuate this experience in the years to come.

In 2020, she shot a short film *The Invisible Majority* for the "Cinetracts '20" project at the Wexner Center for the Arts (Columbus, Ohio).

In 2021 she completed her third feature-length documentary, *Delphine's Prayers*. She is also preparing the shooting of her second short fiction film *Pierrette*.

She divides her time between her production company (Tândor Productions in Belgium and Tândor Films in Cameroon) where she works on several projects, and her teaching activities at KASK in Ghent (Belgium).

## **An van. Dienderen**

An van. Dienderen is a filmmaker graduated in audiovisual arts (Sint-Lukas, Brussels). She obtained a PhD in Comparative Cultural Sciences (Ghent University) and was a visiting scholar at UC Berkeley. She made several documentaries screened worldwide, awarded with (inter)national prizes. Films include *Visitors of the Night* (1998), *Site* (2000), *Tu ne verras pas Verapaz* (2002), *The Ephemerist* (2005), *Patrasche, a Dog of Flanders - Made in Japan* (2008), *Cherry Blossoms* (2012), *Letter Home* (2015) and *Lili* (2015).

She regularly publishes on visual/performative anthropology, is a lecturer at the KASK, School of Arts Ghent, and initiated the international art workspace SoundImageCulture. Her work has been shown on the Margaret Mead Film and Video festival (New York), FID Marseille, DocFest Sheffield, Belluard Festival (Fribourg), DMZ Korea International documentary festival, International Short film Festival Oberhausen, FIDOCs, Festival Internacional de Documentales de Santiago, International Filmfestival Rotterdam, etc.





## 3 FILMMAKERS, 3 VOICES

**An van. Dienderen:** “China Girls” are the images of white women filmed very briefly with a color card. The process is deeply hidden in the technology of cinema. Since it is only used by technicians, the average viewer does not normally get to see it. However, it is a process that demonstrates that the technology of cinema is biased to portray white skin well and the skin of colored people much worse. This is especially evident in images where you bring people with two different skin colors together. You can still see that problem to this day. Even though there are already some improvements, it still comes down to the goodwill of the technicians and of the people who have to stand in front of the camera and wait for hours until a proper, good representation of their skin color can be created, if that’s even possible. Often, those actors are also really particularly disappointed when they finally see the images of themselves: darker skin often results in a terrible mishmash of hues on the screen, with none of the hues corresponding to the actual skin color.

**An:** The tradition of the “China Girls” shows that the camera is not just a technology that objectively captures reality. The technology of the camera is an invention, constructed by humans and therefore not free from cultural biases. This is precisely why the “China Girls” interest me so much, and why I decided to make a film (*Lili*) around them.

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?” I failed in answering these questions, but I found them to be very urgent and pertinent.

I thought that was a very pertinent criticism that I had absolutely no way of refuting. I had already indicated that the follow-up to *Lili* would be a documentary where I’m going to follow filmmakers of different skin colors in their ways of illuminating skin. But that’s still me going to make a film about “the other” as a white person. Now I wanted to approach that differently and really make a collective film. That’s when the shift came from me being the sole author to me wanting to engage in a co-creative process. Because I will never, never know what it is to have a different skin color. And that experience or that embodiment, that’s central to the project.

**Rosine Mbakam:** 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 into 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.

**Eléonore Yameogo:** The project *PRISM*, which was proposed to me by An, was a surprise for me. Why is she interested in this theme? What is her point of view on how to film black people? As a black filmmaker, had I ever felt discriminated by the camera? From that day on, deep questions arose in me...

**Rosine:** 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. 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. There I found a voice of emancipation and a liberation of my gaze. I hope that the viewer will find a way to decolonize as well. 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.

**Eléonore:** In my early childhood in Africa I was rocked to sleep by stories. They were stories that fed my imagination, aroused emotions, and gave me something to build on as a person. My films are built on the same principles of storytelling. The subjects of my films can be sad or happy, but all this rests solidly on a background of values that can build a person or a society. My audience is the human being, because I deal with subjects that concern people, that question their relationships with others, with their environment...

**Rosine:** It’s important to question oneself, to repeat this process even on things that seem obvious to us. My career has always brought me face to face with others and their differences. In Cameroon, I trained in an Italian NGO. I worked in television where I collaborated with Cameroonians, South Africans and Europeans.

I came to Belgium to study Western cinema with the conviction of returning to my country to make films. I fell in love with a Frenchman with whom I have two children. It was as if life wanted me to confront the difference of the other. When you live in a monoculture, you have to take an individual step towards the other. The different stages of my personal journey have allowed me to meet the other, to put myself in his place sometimes, to shift my gaze and discover to what extent the story of the other could be best connected.

**Eléonore:** The main difference between white and black skin is not due to color but rather to density. Exposure is then essential. It is the right exposure, an artistic and technical choice at the same time, which allows to reveal the beauty of black skins, by considering their tint, their texture and by taking into account a fundamental rule of black skins: its low reflection factor of the light. This reflection factor is not a racist invention, it is a law of physics (which I try to demonstrate when shooting my chapter, with characters of different colors). When we adjust a camera, we calibrate both black and white, which are, for a camera, only two electrical values (in microvolts) allowing us to analyze the energy of photons perceived by the sensor.

**Rosine:** It's difficult to be neutral in today's society. You have to get involved, take a stand, choose your side a little. Everything becomes political. While working

on *PRISM*, I discovered myself and what I discovered was not very beautiful. I accepted it and I gave it to the spectator. I believe that as a spectator we commit ourselves by choosing the films we go to see. Those who come to see *PRISM* know that they will be shaken, questioned and will go on to do what they want. I trust the public.

**Eléonore:** There is no possibility of making a camera "that films black people better" because it would be identical in every way to those existing today. I think that we must detach the technical problem of the camera, which is only a tool, from that of the look of the filmmakers and photographers.



# FILMOGRAPHIES

## Eléonore Yameogo

*Le cimetière des éléphants*, feature length documentary, 70' (2018)

*Paris mon Paradis*, feature length documentary, 68' (2011)

*La main tendue*, medium-length film, 48' (2008)

*Ouaga HH*, short film, 26' (2007)

## An van. Dienderen

*Lili*, short film, 10' (2015)

*Letter Home*, short film, 8' (2015)

*Cherry Blossoms*, short film 11' (2013)

*Patrasche, A Dog of Flanders, Made in Japan*, documentary, 85' (2008), directed with Didier Volckaert

*The ephemerist. Pocket Librarian of the Veldstraat*, documentary, 34' (2004), directed with Didier Volckaert

*Tu ne verras pas Verapaz*, documentary, 56' (2002), directed with Didier Volckaert

*Site, Portrait topographique de José Besprosvany*, documentary, 10' (2000)

*Visitors of the Night*, documentary, 34' (1998), directed with Didier Volckaert

*Coitus*, short film, 16mm, b/w, 12' (1995)

*Yzer*, short film, 3' (1993)

## Rosine Mbakam

*Delphine's Prayers*, documentary, 91' (2021)

*Chez Jolie Coiffure*, documentary, 70' (2018)

*The Two Faces of a Bamileke Woman*, documentary, 77' (2016)

*You will be my ally*, fiction, 19' (2012)

*Les portes du passé*, documentary fiction, 13' (2011)

# PRODUCTION HOUSES

## Elektrischer Schnellseher

Elektrischer Schnellseher is a production house, based in Ghent, which focuses on the work by An van. Dienderen. We are interested in the contradiction between fact and fiction, the imaginary and observation, between representation and experience taking as our starting point the importance of the image in our multi-cultural society. The image, the sound, the rhythm, ... we consider these audiovisual tools as toys with which we can bring the above-mentioned theme in an inventive and critical way. Each work produced by Elektrischer Schnellseher therefore aims to create its own visual universe: the subject leads us to a particular use of the camera, the archival material to a specific approach, the ambient sounds to a singular soundtrack.

*[www.anvandienderen.net](http://www.anvandienderen.net)*

## Tândor Productions

Tândor Productions was born from the desire of two people: Geoffroy Cernaix and Rosine Mbakam. Their motivations were to set up a professional creation space in the respect of the authors, their works and to support projects having a singular and authentic point of view. Today, Tândor Productions is also a group of young film technicians concerned with setting up and defending another way of making cinema. In 2018 Tândor Films was created in Yaoundé, Cameroon, with the idea of expanding our production horizons.

*[tandorproductions.com](http://tandorproductions.com)*

## Onezik

Onezik is a structure created in 2017 in Burkina Faso, with the ambition to produce films whose stories are rooted in African cultures and traditions while opening up to the world. Its goal is to allow new talents or experienced scriptwriters to express their creativity through the writing of unique and captivating stories. The structure works with young and experienced directors while encouraging dialogues between them.

Since its creation, Onezik has been developing projects with authors and producers from different African countries, notably Chad, Senegal and Burkina Faso, thus concretizing its desire to go where the talent is and to bring out major works. Although Africa is the mainstay of the structure, it wants to be open to universality and in this perspective is nourished by external contributions and is also built by co-production agreements with structures from other continents.

# CONTACT

## Distribution

Icarus Films (VS and Canada): [mail@icarusfilms.com](mailto:mail@icarusfilms.com)

ARGOS centre for audiovisual arts (other regions): [distribution@argosarts.org](mailto:distribution@argosarts.org)

## Press and communication

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