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NYFF Review: Engrossing 'Prism' doc examines how photographic technologies favor white skin, questions the "neutral camera" [Grade: A]

Maria Garcia September 25, 2021



Eléonore Yameogo, An van Dienderen, Rosine Mbakam's *Prism* may spark an entirely new conversation about racial bias in filmmaking, namely the "problem" of calibrating non-white skin tones.

Screening in the "Currents" or avant-garde section of the 59th New York Film Festival, the documentary defines the issue from the unique perspectives of each of its filmmakers, and then grapples with the underlying technology, expertly exposing the ways in which inequities often hide in plain sight. While Dienderen's segment considers filmmaking techniques or praxis, Mbakam's engages in cultural critique, and a consideration of Marie-Guillemine Benoist's famous painting "Portrait de Nègresse" (1800). Yameogo's section assumes a straightforward, journalistic stance, and features a delightful actor who interviews filmmakers and cinematographers.

Dienderen, a Belgian filmmaker (*Cherry Blossoms*, 2013) invited Mbakam (*Delphine's Prayers*, 2021), a Belgian-based Cameroonian filmmaker, and Yameogo (*Paris non Paradis*, 2011), a Paris-based filmmaker from Burkino Faso, both of whom are Black, to broaden the scope of her investigation beyond her own experience as a white woman. At first the three filmmakers appear in Zoom clips, discussing how to construct the film they are about to make. For instance, should they begin with the camera's shortcomings? The color range for the human eye is broader than that of a camera, and cinematographers consider a number of factors in calibrating the light necessary to accurately represent an actor's skin tone. They wonder if the camera favors light skin. What of the directors' aesthetic choices, especially when a Black or Asian actor is paired with a white one? Throughout the film, the claims of technological neutrality are consistently undermined, as they are in Shalini Kantayya's *Coded Bias* (2020), about the bias inherent in algorithms used for facial recognition software.

The filmmakers' discussion soon turns to the historical, philosophical and moral issues inherent to Western hierarchies of race and gender. All three speak about the fact that film professors, directors and actors are all aware of European filmmakers' preference for light skinned actors. The underlying technical reasons for this view are dramatically evinced in Dienderen's depiction of a white, male actor and a dark-skinned woman poised on a decorated set in which all of the elements, except for the humans and a fish swimming in a shallow bowl, are gray. Switching between the set and filmed images of it, Dienderen brightens the light and then dims it, in the process changing the position of the light source. The white man's skin tones remain apparent, yet the Black woman is slowly eclipsed as the set darkens.

Some technical knowledge is necessary to understand Dienderen's commentary: in order to determine the proper aperture settings on both film and digital cameras, cinematographers rely on what is referred to as "18% gray" or "middle gray," the logarithmic midpoint between white and black on a standardized brightness scale. Dienderen's gray walls and objects in this scene correspond to that hue, dramatically drawing attention to, and critiquing, the standard that obviously favors white skin. Cinematographers use cards printed with that color, held up to actors' faces, as part of the process of determining how they should be lit. A Kodak color scale, seen in close up, taped to a table on the set, is another reference to the longstanding utility of middle gray.

Next is Mbakam's contribution to the film in which she discovers aspects of her identity in art that preserves Black history, beginning with Benoist's painting, now called "Portrait of Madeleine" (after a 2019 Musée d'Orsay exhibit that named painters' models), and ending with an unidentified 1926 black and white photograph. This segment of *Prism* most clearly demonstrates a way to combat the actual and philosophical implications of "middle gray," mainly through "reflexivity." This practice establishes authorship beyond that of the filmmaker by, for instance, a character's direct gaze at the camera and at the audience. In feminist theory, this gaze seeks to deconstruct patriarchal notions of an omnipotent creator, democratizing the image or work of art. Mbakam's segment begins with her entering a studio dressed in the white, flowing, African gown, complete with headress, worn by Madeleine in Benoist's painting. She assumes the same seated position, although her breast is not bared as it is in the painting. Near the end of this scene, she stares directly into the camera.

Benoist's Madeleine now belongs to Mbakam, but while she is reclaiming her from the white painter, she is also inviting the rumination of others, including the audience and An. Mbakam compares Madeleine and herself to the creature in Maya Angelou's "Caged Bird" (1983) that appears onscreen as text during the sequence. An imagines Benoist's Madeleine, now reincarnated as Mbakam, as a woman anticipating a forced marriage, one who has retained her humanity despite having faced tyranny. In the end, Mbakam concludes in voice-over: "I am colonized." She speaks as both a progenitor and a descendant of the now democratized Madeleine. This elegiac contemplation of Black womanhood, of slavery, colonization and historical memory may be compared to Langston Hughes' "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (1921) in which he imagines history residing in both his body and in the landscapes and waters of the slave trade.

Last is Yameogo's segment that begins with actor Talla Kpomahou (*Identité Malsaine*, 2010) speaking to a camera opposite her face, contemplating its power in the "immortalizing" of her actions. "Who am I to you," she asks. The answer is a beautiful montage of African faces, the actor speaking in first-person, voice-over narration; in each visage she identifies an aspect of African identity—a man who sees inequities but remains unaffected, and a nurturing mother, too often scorned. Kpomahou then shifts to a recollection of a theatrical role in which she was the "luminous black woman"; she recalls that later, on television, she was deemed "hard to illuminate." Her reminiscences are the framework for Yameogo's investigation of the camera and the filmmaker's gaze. Kpomahou conducts the interviews.

She starts with Sylvestre Amoussou (*Africa Paradis*, 2006), a Beninese actor, and writer-director who states, unequivocally, "... aesthetics and emulsions were not created for us." Amoussou also points to the dearth of make-up artists who can prepare Black skin for the camera. Cinematographer Diarra Sourank, whose university studies centered on how to photograph Blacks on film, points to the fact that everyone's skin possesses "an abundance of hues and nuances" and that a cinematographer's task is "not to light a dark part," but rather to "bring out the colors." She also confirms Amoussou's conclusions that cameras are optimized for white skin but insists that the "problem" of lighting Black or Asian skin is overcome by first addressing Eurocentrism and racial bias. In the final scenes of the documentary, a lively Zoom exchange, Yameogo insists that the documentary must provide solutions for the problem they have all identified. That is answered by the final shot of the film, held for nearly a minute—it is An's "middle gray" stage.

Grade: A

This review is from the New York Film Festival. *Prism* will have U.S. distribution from Icarus Films.

Photo courtesy of Icarus Films

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Maria Garcia is a New York City-based film critic and feature writer, and the author of two books, most recently *Cinematic Quests for Identity: The Hero's Encounter with the Beast* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2015). She is the cinema columnist for *Ambassador* magazine, and a frequent contributor to *Cineaste*. Her reviews and features have appeared in many newspapers and magazines, including the *LA Times*, *Film Journal International*, *The Brooklyn Eagle* and *The Progressive*, and on *Biography.com*. Maria is a Rotten Tomatoes Approved Critic.

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