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RE>CONNEXT review: Prism by An van. Dienderen, Eléonore Yameogo, Rosine Mbakam

Mark AdamsOctober 4, 2021 at 10:15 am



An intriguing, passionate and thoughtful exploration into how racism has been entrenched in film culture through the essential technical tool of filmmaking itself, and looking closely at how the lighting for movie cameras has long been calibrated for white skin.

Three filmmakers explore the literal, theoretical, and philosophical dimensions of that technical reality. Eléonore Yameogo from Burkina Faso, An van. Dienderen from Belgium and Rosine Mbakam from Cameroon discuss the practicalities and the ethics behind this unconscious (or perhaps conscious as one argues) bias within film technology as well as each offering up a short film presenting a series of differing perspectives and ideas.

Through their films and their discussions they explore the cinematic construction of whiteness and how this relates to power, wealth and privilege, while also presenting debate on how black skin has been, and can be, presented with greater sensitivity.

The film opens with a sequence from An van. Dienderen's 2015 short film *Lili*, which told the stories about 'China Girls,' women with porcelain white skin who since the 1920s have been filmed alongside a colour chart to adjust the colour grading of cameras in printing.

Prism then switches to the almost obligatory in-computer meeting (via Skype nostalgically, rather than Zoom) of the three filmmakers, with An van. Dienderen discussing the racism of technology. "For me it is very clear that there is an ideology in technology," she says. "Normally it should be a purely technical exercise to find the right balance between colours and between the light and the skin colour. By using a white woman, it is already an ideological choice."

An van. Dienderen's film is set against the backdrop of the KASK Conservatorium School of Arts in Ghent where a series of tracking shots sees her eventually move into the main building and a pale grey set where a bald white man stands close to a black woman who is sitting down. She adjusts the tone and light/dark ratios which accentuates the man (also wearing a suitably pale hoodie) and sees the black woman fade into the background at times with no real accentuation of her features.

Rosine Mbakam's film covers several areas, initially replicating (with an actress in a studio) Marie Guillemine Benoist's famous 1800 painting 'Portrait of Madeleine', of a strong black woman in a white robe and white hair (though not topless as the picture presents her). The film then switches to INSAS Institute of performing arts and broadcasting techniques in Brussels where she talks to lecturers who taught her about representation and storytelling, also showing an extract of her 2006 film *Marina*.

Eléonore Yameogo's film sees actress Tella Kpomahou discussing how when she was initially working on stage in a role, her character was described as "the luminous black woman" which was how she similarly saw herself, but that when she went on to work in film and television she was told that "people of colour are hard to illuminate." Kpomahou talks to filmmaker and writer Sylvestre Amoussou about his attitude to filming and also to an expert who has conducted research on how dark skin should be filmed.

Described as an experimental film, *Prism* is in fact quite straightforward in structure, but raises powerful and confrontational issues that are debated with intelligence, insight and a great deal of emotion. The question of whether technology can be unconsciously racist is both philosophical and emotionally resonant, and the underlying question around the neutrality of the camera also raises questions about its ability to face up to basic inequalities around the colour of skin.

Belgium, 2021, 78mins
Directors An van. Dienderen, Eléonore Yameogo, Rosine Mbakam
International sales Icarus Films
Producer Natalie Gielen
Screenplay Rosine Mbakam, An van. Dienderen, Eléonore Yameogo
Cinematography Léo Lefèvre, Philippe Radoux
Editors Effi Weiss, Nina de Vroome, Geoffroy Cernaix, Tristan Galand
Music Simon Winse
With David Fricker, Lydia Zei, Sylvestre Amoussou, Moya Michael, Jeroen Perceval, Bwange Pilipili, Maureen Vandenberghe, Patrick Leboutte, Tella Kpomahou, Diarra Sourank

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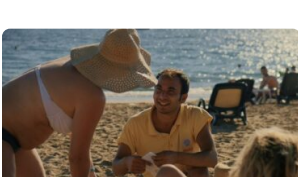
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