

Film

Review

Prism review - three-part film essay turns the camera on race, colour and imperialism



Three film-makers, An van Dienderen, Rosine Mbakam and Eléonore Yaméogo, examine how the lens cannot be neutral in issues of marginalisation

Phuong Le

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Colour tests ... a still from Prism. Photograph: True Story

A collaborative project between film-makers Rosine Mbakam, An van Dienderen and Eléonore Yaméogo, Prism interrogates the supposed neutrality of the photographic lens, principally in regards to representations of race. Moving through the corridors of a film school before alighting on a sparse set where a lighting test is taking place, Dienderen's section unfolds as a continuation of her short film Lili, which grapples with a cinema practice called "china girl". Used for calibration purposes, these test images usually feature a white model and a colour chart; in other words, colour films were made with only white skin in mind.

While Dienderen's work grapples with camera bias on a technical level, Mbakam and Yaméogo expand the argument by pointing to larger ideological frameworks. In her segment, Mbakam draws an explicit link between imperialism and cinema; early footage of Africans, for instance, was taken by their colonisers. And restaging Marie-Guillemine Benoist's famous painting Portrait of a Black Woman with a live model, who applies her own makeup and stares back at the viewers with defiance, Mbakam reclaims the autonomy of marginalised figures from the white gaze.



Structured around candid interviews with Black talents such as the actor Tella Kpomahou and director Sylvestre Amoussou, Yaméogo's contribution argues that the camera's racial bias is not set in stone. While systemic hurdles remain, works by visionary film-makers ranging from Senegalese pioneer Paulin Soumanou Vieyra to Spike Lee have shown that Black lives can exist on screen in their full vibrancy and complexity. In creating a dialogue between the three different segments, this prismatic exploration of race and cinema emphasises how film-making can never be a monologue, but a conversation.

Prism is available from 16 February on True Story.

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