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The Scopic Regime of “Africa”

1: Performing a Place

‘Travelling in Africa is adventurous enough as it is, without any fiction’

H.M. Stanley, *How I Found Livingstone* (1872)

‘...the history of the European view of non-European peoples has always reflected Europeans’ history of imaging themselves’

(Landau, 2002: 2)

From natural history museums to imperial exhibitions, from postcards to comic strips, from travel writings to accounts of exploration and missionary activity, from colonial photographs to contemporary cinema, “Africa” has been consistently (re)produced and enacted across a wide range of cultural sites. Just as Frantz Fanon once described the racialisation of subjectivity in late colonial Algeria as being ‘fixed by a dye’, the performance of “Africa” through various technologies of observation, reproduction and display has been remarkably consistent and enduring. The continent has been infantilised, feminised and homogenised whilst being repetitively reduced (Andreasson, 2005) to what is ‘seen’ to be deficient.

In this sense it is important to consider how this “Africa” has been enacted, circulated and consumed historically through performance (Ebron, 2000) and how these historical encounters create the place of Africa in the world. The “Africa” that the world imagines (often through dystopic images) is always a thing of illusion, magic and contradiction but the performance of this construct and the meanings attached to it have particular temporalities. The ideological space that “Africa” occupied in the popular imagination from the last decades of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the First World War was coherent if not always fixed. The continent envisioned was at once savage, threatening, exotic and productive in ways which varied depending on the political exigencies of the particular historical conjuncture (Coombes, 1994). To understand how these performances of “Africa” have become its representation we need to consider the historicity of its visual enunciation as well as the political consequences of its persistent re-enactment. In principle, this involves taking into consideration the entire ‘domain of images’ (Elkins, 1999) as well as the intertextual spaces of the visual. Although we cannot accommodate all that could be understood in terms of images or visibility, in this chapter we consider a wide range of visual practices that have contributed to the enactment of “Africa”. We begin with a review of the literary tradition because we understand writing to be a visual technology central to the construction of the continent. The argument then moves onto the practices of collecting, curatorship and display in the context of museums and imperial exhibitions, before turning to the technologies associated with cinema, photography and digital computer games.

We take the idea of ‘scopic regimes’ to be an important heuristic category through which the enduring performance of Africa can be understood. Martin Jay (1988)

famously developed the idea of scopic regimes from the work of film theorist Christian Metz (1982) who argued that a given sensory regime was hegemonic in a particular historical period. In terms of visibility, Jay argued that Cartesian perspectivalism – which combined Renaissance notions of perspective with Cartesian ideas of subjective rationality – produced a dominant if not hegemonic scopic regime in which the singular eye of the observer coldly arrested all before it in ways consonant with a scientific world view. Gregory (2003: 224) drew from this the idea of a systematic structuring of the visual field which produced a ‘constructed visibility that allows particular objects to be seen in determinate ways,’ while Feldman (2005: 224n) argued a scopic regime was the sum of the ‘agendas and techniques of political visualization: the regimens that prescribe modes of seeing and object visibility and that proscribe or render untenable other modes and objects of perception. A scopic regime is an ensemble of practices and discourses that establish the truth claims, typicality and credibility of visual acts and objects and politically correct modes of seeing.’

The idea of the scopic regime is far from being uncontested, at least in so far as it can be read as promoting an ocularcentrism that fails to accord senses such as the auditory and haptic a constitutive place in performance (MacDonald, 2008). While we argue that the visual can be read discursively, we do not regard it as a discourse distinct from all other senses. In this context, our argument intersects with Judith Butler’s (2007) account of the frames that produce a field of perceptible reality and establish the recognisability of certain figures of the human. While Butler argues the visual is vital in transmitting the norms that establish the conditions of possibility for an ethical response to the other, other practices are also at play in this. The scopic

regime, therefore, is one element, albeit an historically significant element, in the performance of perceptible places. As such, we identify with Butler's (2007: 966) call to 'thematize the forcible frame, the one that conducts the dehumanizing norm.'

It is our contention that, although contested, there has been produced in the last century or so a dominant scopic regime that plays a major role in enacting a place in the world called "Africa", largely through the repetition and reiteration of colonial tropes. As James Ferguson (2006: 2) argues, 'for all that has changed, "Africa" continues to be described through a series of lacks and absences, failings and problems, plagues and catastrophes.' This 'suspiciously dark' account of a continent surely hides much that goes uncovered, but we concur with Ferguson (2006:8, 10) that we should neither shy away from the abundant evidence that supports elements of these characterisations nor retreat into a particularist defence that refuses to engage with the category of "Africa" itself. In our account, the scopic regime is a repertoire of perspectival practices, embedded in a global visual economy, which establishes the relationship between the observer and observed, producing both subject positions in the process. At its most powerful this scopic regime contributes greatly to a forcible frame. It is not singular, nor is it unchallenged, but it is powerful in the performances it elicits over time. And above all else, it is significant in establishing the conditions of possibility for an ethical response to the events and issues it makes available to us.

2: Enacting "Africa" – The Literary Background

Between 1870 and 1960, during which time there was a huge increase in western 'non-fiction' writings about Africa from explorers, scientists, travel writers,

journalists, colonial administrators and missionaries, the continent was increasingly plunged into ‘darkness’ (Brantlinger, 1988). Writing is itself a visual technology and in this sense it is useful to consider ‘how a gaze actually graphs and an eye can write’ (Ó Tuathail, 2000: 390). In this sense, we want to begin with literary visions of “Africa” since the visual should be understood discursively, as a range of social practices (not just technologies) that contributed to the production and performance of this social construct. In particular, the writing of Africa through the metaphor of darkness and light has been a central and recurring theme (Brantlinger, 1988; 2003). As Derrida (1978: 27) has argued, this metaphor of darkness and light (of self-revelation and self-concealment) ‘[is] the founding metaphor of Western philosophy as metaphysics... The entire history of our philosophy is a photology, the name given to a history, or treatise on, light’. This homogenising metaphor of Africa as the ‘dark continent’ ‘flattens places and people’ (Jarosz, 1992: 105) and serves as a negatively valued foil for western notions of superiority and enlightenment (Ryan, 1997). Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and Henry Morton Stanley’s *Through the Dark Continent* were seminal here, depicting the continent and its peoples as ‘savage’, ‘exotic’, ‘cannibal’ and ‘primitive.’ European travel writings also played an important role in enframing and visualising Africa, creating the domestic subject of European imperialism and engaging metropolitan reading publics with the expansionist enterprises of empire (Pratt, 1992). Imperial travel existed alongside settler literatures in European languages, including short stories, poems, romance novels, essays and memoirs (McClure, 1994; Boehmer, 1998). Written by imperial adventurers, colonial administrators, missionaries, propagandists and poets, they reflected the diverse responses to colonial experience. Although this writing of Africa was far from monolithic (Pratt, 1992; Blunt, 1994), a number of rhetorical modalities have

persisted (Spurr, 2002) and whilst these are not necessarily unique to Africa (and not all of them occur in every colonial text) they do represent an important part of the repertoire of colonial discourse and constitute a very significant range of tropes and conceptual categories. According to Spurr (2002) these include surveillance, appropriation, aestheticization, classification, debasement, negation, affirmation, idealization, insubstantialization, naturalization, eroticization, and resistance.

The observation and description of indigenous peoples, landscapes and territories would often involve various forms of surveillance. The ‘commanding view’ or ‘writer’s eye’ that many textual enactments of Africa articulated sought to take possession of African landscapes by ordering and arranging what is seen, making possible the mapping and exploration of colonial territory. This ‘Monarch-of-all-I-survey-scene’ (Pratt, 1992: 201) is enacted, for example, in Henry Morton Stanley’s account of the rescue of Emin Pasha in *Darkest Africa*. Allied to this is the ‘relation of mastery predicated between seer and seen’ (Pratt, 1992: 204) as the writer produces the landscape for their audience conveying the impression that what is seen is all there is and that the landscape was intended to be viewed from this particular (static) vantage point. Further, many western writers made the experience of “Africa” into an inner journey, rendering that world as insubstantial in the process or as the backdrop against which is played ‘the drama of the writer’s self’ (Spurr, 1993: 142).

Explorers, scientists, travel writers, journalists, colonial administrators and missionaries often scripted Africa in a way which implicitly claimed the territory surveyed as the colonisers’ own but this appropriative strategy was disguised in the form of an appeal to nature, humanity and the colonised themselves. Here the

exploitation of African colonial territories becomes a moral as well as a political and economic imperative. Often writers would enact and emphasise the exotic, the bizarre, the grotesque or the elemental in outlining (for example) the abundance of nature, the ease of subsistence, the lack of private possessions, the 'romantic' simplicity, the pleasures of day-to-day life or the unfamiliarity of scents, sounds and images (which have for centuries been common topoi in the representation of 'exotic' African societies). The rhetorical device of debasement saw indigenous people reduced to beings of an inferior status (usually as 'animals') with European identities contrasted against this other in order to create a clear cut Manichean division between coloniser and colonised, almost as an act of preservation. The ultimate horror here was to 'go native' (like Kurtz in Conrad's novella), to lose one's sense of difference and superiority and to regress or revert to a 'savage' past. Here the natives are reviled for their non-Western otherness but also ridiculed for their attempts to imitate the forms of the West. According to Chinua Achebe (1988), debasement is a fundamental characteristic of western attitudes towards Africa where the continent serves merely as a setting or backdrop. Envisioning 'primitive peoples' as living a 'natural life' in 'natural surroundings' led to a view that saw indigenous communities as extensions of the landscape, 'as wilderness in human form' (Spurr, 1993: 165). Portrayals of the 'noble savage' similarly emphasised the exotic Other's closeness to nature, gentleness or innocence. European domination and control over nature becomes another way of justifying Empire since this was central to the presumption of 'civilisation'. The persistent assignment to Africa and Africans of a close proximity to nature serves to make the contemporary apocalyptic imagery of war, violence, disaster and social unrest appear as something 'natural' since the continent is seen to be governed by the forces of nature and not those of reason or civilisation.

Many explorers and travel writers also envisioned Africa as a largely unscripted and primeval continent. The ‘blank space on the map’ that Marlow invokes in Conrad’s novella is a continent awaiting exploration and, ultimately, colonisation. As a fantasy space, “Africa” quickly became the ideal setting for a masculinist daydream. The absences and blanks created a desire to go there and fill the void left by ‘Africa’s essential nothingness’ (Spurr, 1993: 92) since Africa is presented as having no history or pre-existing social order of its own which is then only created by the presence of the male European explorer and discoverer. Colonial rule and authority are thereby constructed as creative rather than violent acts. This legitimacy is also produced through the rhetorical device of self-affirmation where the presence and power of colonialism is justified and legitimated by idealising this project and its protagonists. Here then many colonial literatures affirmed the collective values of the colonial enterprise and the selflessness and obligations of trusteeship or the ‘white man’s burden’ of bringing ‘light’ to the dark continent. In other ways the dark continent was also feminised, with colonial literatures and travel writings often ascribing feminine or even erotic qualities to Africa, as it becomes the explorer’s mistress, both mysterious and tempting. The ‘African woman’ (a singular and homogenising construct frozen in time and space) became the classic figure of sexual adventure and a mirror for the whole continent constructed as an immense, prolific, fertile body (Schiebinger, 1995). “Africa” thus offered ‘the aphrodisiac of the unknown’ (Hodeir, 2002: 233). The ‘reality’ of Africa was often depicted as concealed behind a veil and as mysterious with the aim of colonial exploration to unveil her by penetrating deeper into the interior and to ‘virgin territory’. While the European colonist presented himself as disciplined and rational, it is an unrestricted

sexuality that characterises the exotic other. In emphasising the exotic nature of Africa a distance is produced that is instrumental in purveying an image of the atavism of the inhabitants of African societies. As a consequence, barbarism, madness and disaster are made to seem more natural as Africa and its peoples are held at arms length and become an ‘object of beauty, horror, pleasure and pity’ (Spurr, 1993: 59).

3: Enacting “Africa” – The Museum and the Imperial Exhibition

Given the importance of Enlightenment thinking to the enactment and performance of Africa it is important to recognise that the museum was also an important cultural site for the dissemination of (‘scientific’) knowledge regarding Africa to a diverse public. Hooper-Greenhill (1992) argues that the public/private division of knowledge hardened in the nineteenth century, with a new role emerging for the state. It was in this context that the public museum emerged, an enterprise and a technology producing a vast and expanding network of new classifications that systematised knowledge about the world (Crang, 2003). With the rapid development of regional and national collections under British imperial expansion, the nascent discipline of museum ethnography struggled to demonstrate its relevance to both the state and the public. In this context, ethnographic displays became increasingly important. Museological dramas were also crucial to the performance and projection of a ‘publicly imagined past’ (Blatti, 1987: 7) and can be considered an important part of what Cantwell (1993) calls ‘ethnomimesis’ or the performance of a particular group identity to an audience.

The physical arrangement of an ethnographic collection within the space of the museum often involved typological classifications of material culture, from primitive to advanced, serving to demonstrate the evolutionary theories of anthropology and justify the need for technological advancement in the guise of colonisation. These micro-geographies of museums and their ordering and arrangement of space were often typical of a disciplinary knowledge whose object it was to fix: ‘it is an anti-nomadic force...[which] which uses procedures of partitioning and cellularity’ (Foucault, 1977: 218-9). It was no co-incidence that just at the moment when Bentham produced his planned panopticon of enclosed surveillance, a few miles away the Crystal Palace imperial exhibition site was being built. The Crystal Palace was followed a few years later by the ‘Albertopolis’ of museums and exhibitionary institutions in Kensington in London (including the Natural History Museum, The Museum of mankind, the Victoria and Albert museum, the Albert Hall and the Royal Geographical Society). We need to think then about the historical emergence of a wider ‘exhibitionary complex’ in the nineteenth century (Bennett, 1988) which came about with the moving of objects into public displays (e.g. in museums and exhibitions) which served to broadcast other messages of power.

World fairs and imperial expositions were an important part of the process of exhibiting European imperialism to domestic audiences and offer a useful point of entry into critical considerations of the performance of “Africa”. Such exhibitions have been understood as sites where a commodity world was on show, but it could also be argued that the performances of Africa enacted in these spaces also circulated as commodities. Exhibitions were thus imperial spectacles and pictures of a capitalist ‘world of resources’ (Olds and Ley, 1998). Between 1854 and 1911, over thirty

colonial exhibitions opened to the public across the British Empire from Calcutta to Melbourne, from Delhi to Queensland, all demonstrating the unprecedented energy of cultural professionals, scientists, administrators, entrepreneurs, colonial officials and bureaucrats across British territories interested in recreating the empire in their own image. From London's Great Exhibition in 1851 to the Universal Exposition of Paris in 1889, these spaces exhibited landscapes of bourgeois and imperial ideology, privileging western science and 'civilisation' and their putative contribution to progress and modernity.¹ Collectively, imperial exhibitions rested upon a highly particular way of thinking about, being in and visualising the world (Gregory, 1994) in part based on a particular process of enframing "Africa" that seemed to exist apart from and prior to the objects contained and to be peculiar to European modernity (Mitchell, 1989). The ephemeral architecture of some exhibitions was in many cases analogous to a film set, producing a kind of cinematographic effect (Hodeir, 2002). Individual buildings representing the French colonies at the 1931 International Colonial Exhibition, for example, were built higher than the treetops to increase panoramic visibility. According to Hoffenberg (2001), post-1851 exhibitions which incorporated the use of large-scale cultural events and institutions were more dynamic and effective in luring the public to imperial visions than their predecessors had been and were designed specifically to integrate the masses and forge a sense of imperial unity (e.g. by exploring the Commonwealth or other forms of imperial 'federation').

Featuring more popular forms of spectacle and fantasy, post-1851 exhibitions were essential parts of the 'new' imperialism offering spectacles that dazzled consumers with the dual aura of imperial fantasy and technological advancement. Exhibitions also anticipated the creation of public spaces that imaged a peaceful social

order and the grandeur of imperial rule (Hoffenburg, 2001). The *experience* of the exhibition was also important involving a walking, observing, touching, sensing, consuming and learning public. Exhibitions often evoked in the public a sense of wonder and awe by presenting things ‘in motion’ while also stimulating their desires to buy and collect things fantastic and foreign. Buttons and cranks were essential interactive tools that encouraged hands-on engagement with the displays of machinery while artisanal products heightened fascination with collectibles and memorabilia.

At the 1889 Paris Universal Exposition model ‘native African villages’ were simulated on site and African subjects repeatedly performed particular dances, customs, rituals, craftsmanship and hunting and gathering techniques in and around these ‘villages’. The model villages were sanitised in order to offer an imagined landscape for European visitors who might be discomforted by the idea of a ‘real’ trip to Africa. Parisian women quickly developed an ethos of maternal charity towards the African subjects, often bringing sweets or candies in the belief that these curious people were simply overgrown children (Hodeir, 2002). Often these infantilising performances would be staged alongside symbols of European technology and modernity. At the 1931 International Colonial Exhibition in Paris, visited by 33 million people, a weekly procession appeared along the *Grande Avenue des Colonies* that would publicise theatrical performances in the exhibition such as *An African Fairy Tale*, *Dancing and Singing from the Colonial World*, *Colonial Nights* and *Farewell to the Colonies* (Hodeir, 2002).

Many expositions positioned European imperial powers like Britain, France or Portugal as ‘pioneers’ of this evolutionary process of human history and celebrated

this 'superior' contribution alongside a concomitant parodying of the 'inferior' non-west. Thus one of the significant tropes of such exhibitions was a celebration of progress that involved juxtaposing the old and the new: the traditional, even 'savage' past and the 'civilised' present. Indigenous peoples were often depicted as locked in battle and their 'primitive' technologies of war would be exhibited alongside more 'modern' European versions. The complexity and contradictions in these tropes is explored by Morton (2000) in relation to the International Colonial Exhibition in Paris in 1931 where the tensions between the colonial project of civilisation and the need to represent colonised cultures as 'backward' and timeless (in order to justify this civilising mission) were acutely evident. In the Franco-British exhibition of 1908 "Africa" was figured differently because it had become important to visualise Africa as a continent that was 'civilisable'. Each exhibition offered a staging of the modern (Mitchell, 2000) and each claimed a certain universality for modernity whilst trying to render a particular take on the global and hybrid history of modernity. Yet exhibitions also centred on forms of difference that introduced the possibility of a discrepancy between the proclaimed universality of modernity and unity of Europe and the specificity of different forms of empire. Exhibitions thus often produced what Pred (1995) calls 'repress-entations' where some elements were actively silenced in ways that were similar to the symptomatic repressions, amnesic gaps and *forgetting* of Africa that characterise the narrative corpus of Conrad's novella.

Coombes (1994) writes of how exhibitionary 'spectacles' between 1890 and 1913 re-presented "Africa" differently, reinventing it from the land of 'savages' that only military intervention could redeem, to a dark and mysterious continent, full of unusual rituals and strange behaviour. The latter was an Africa that could be helped

with the aid of colonial ‘care’ and a metropolitan sense of responsibility. This change in view was not so much due to new philosophies or enlightenment as much as pecuniary desires to capitalise upon the huge public interest in all things African that was being manipulated by exhibition promoters at the end of the nineteenth and start of the twentieth centuries. Anthropological theories regarding racial difference were conveyed to the public through exhibitions of African material culture and displays of Africans themselves. Further, in the heart of a range of imperial cities the Zoo also played an important and associated role in visualising ‘savage Africa’ (Anderson, 1995).

In many exhibitions, black performers billed simply as ‘Africans’ would often be drawn from a particular society that held a topical fascination for British, French or Portuguese audiences because of their notoriety through recent conflicts (Coombes, 1994). Thus exhibitions constructed racial difference through spectacle. Although exhibition organisers often denied that their product was fiction and emphasised the exhibition visit as distinct from a theatrical experience, literary and exhibition constructions of racial ‘types’ and identities overlapped and corresponded with one another quite closely. The official guidebook for the 1899 ‘Briton, Boer and Black’ exhibition compared the inhabitants of a ‘Zulu Kraal’ to a Rider Haggard novel (Coombes, 1994).

4: Enacting “Africa” – Cinema and Photography

Visual practices of enacting “Africa” were taken to a new dimension with the invention of cinema in 1895, billed as a universally comprehensible form of visualisation. Cinema began to discover its true narrative potential only when it

explored the real possibilities of *movement*, which was an important point of distinction from parallel media like photography. Within years of the colonial emergence of cinematographic practices in Africa in the 1920s, the medium was being inserted into the problematic of the historical record, re-making the boundaries of fact and fiction, truth and falsehood. In so doing, cinema followed on from the way colonial photography had functioned as a form of geographical discourse visualizing the non-European world as other. While colonial photography, especially in its anthropological mode as a classificatory practice cataloguing indigenous colonial subjects, was part of the apparatus of surveillance required by imperialism, it was also a fractured practice which served the critics of empire at home and abroad (Ryan, 1997).

Like their still counterparts, film images served an important role as information, scientific record and novelty in colonial propaganda (Ryan, 1994) alongside the press, education, international exhibitions and popular art. After WWI, cinema became part of all expeditions into the African continent, underlining the link between cinematographic practice and colonial conquest. Colonial film units began to emerge in Africa at the beginning of World War Two in an attempt to supplement the propaganda power of the radio broadcast. In Britain the 1926 creation of the government sponsored Empire Marketing Board (which had also been part of the organisation of imperial exhibitions) led to a number of experiments with documentary films about the empire. With the outbreak of World War Two the EMB's successor was split into the Crown Film Unit and the Colonial Film Unit. Up until 1952 the two units produced between 3000 and 5000 35mm films (Film Images, 2007).

The Second World War also drew the attention of the French authorities in Algeria to the propaganda potential of film. In Algeria a *Service de diffusion cinématographique* (SDC) was established in 1943 to bring *ciné-bus* units to rural communities, showing films to some one million Algerians by 1948 (Malkmus and Armes, 1991). The majority of French colonial films were made in the course of travels, expeditions, missions, voyages and other colonial ‘adventures’ with films as ‘travelogues’. French and many other western cinematic representations of Africa produced under colonialism helped to reinforce the dominant vision of Africa as a continent with no history and no culture (Murphy, 2000). A variety of films were made by the French government with the goal of showing and celebrating French colonial ‘achievements’. According to Slavin (2001) French colonial cinema played an important role in making and remaking an assumed difference between the supposedly superior French civilization and the exotic, colonized African ‘other’. It was in the 1920s and 1930s, partly in the arena of colonial film, that Frenchness became distinctly a white identity with many films warning about the perils of miscegenation. Slavin (2001) explores the masculine fantasies that dominate French films about North Africa and the ‘blind spots’ (the avoidance or denial of colonial realities) that these produced among workers in Europe. Many films tried to capture the mobility inherent in the French colonial enterprise and can be read as testimonies to the French translation of colonial space. Maps of Africa appeared at the start of a large number of colonial films and were representations of the colonial fantasy of *possessing Africa*. Many of these maps showed an Africa that was ‘empty’ and ready to be ‘possessed’ and communicated a vision of Africa as approachable by anyone watching the movie. A variety of colonial films thus show an Africa that is only

enlivened through the agency and sorcery of the coloniser (with the presumed primitiveness of the continent an important backdrop for this performance).

Early colonial films failed to acknowledge any of the Africans involved in their production and played down the difficulties colonial conquest had encountered (e.g. in terms of disease or climate). Despite the variety of African locations that colonial films represent, the undifferentiated figure of ‘the African’ was often constructed. These films can thus tell us a lot about the nexus of imperial interests in African affairs and about the racist ideologies at work in the cinematographic imagination of European imperial powers like France. Many films sought to underline the technological advancement of the coloniser (often showing images of new forms of transport in action) or sought to highlight the corresponding ‘backwardness’ of the technologies of the colonised. Cinema was thus an instrument of conquest, a medium used in the representation of history largely through the eyes of the conqueror (at least until the advent of anti-colonial cinema in the late 1950s). In many colonies indigenous people were excluded from cinema theatres and were instead offered ‘wandering cinemas’ (mobile cinema units) which projected imperial propaganda in rural areas. There were thus separate circuits of exhibition for the indigenous and settler communities.

Some of the first colonial films were short newsreels and documentaries (many of which were made by groups of amateur cinema enthusiasts) that tried to convey ‘progress’ (e.g. in infrastructure or agriculture). By 1927 Kodak cine-cameras were becoming increasingly popular and there were many amateur films that document the adventures of the ‘photographer-explorer’ in Africa. New camera technologies were marketed in magazines like *National Geographic* which sought ‘to

deliver advice on how to deal with camera-shy natives' (Gordon, 2002: 216). Soon almost every American, British, French, Italian or Portuguese expedition into Africa included a cinematographer. The documentary or 'actuality' filmmaking first emerged in Europe and North America in the late 1890's. In France, all non-fiction films (including documentaries) were initially termed *actualités* that originally meant nothing more than the conversational topics of the hour (including, of course, imperial rule). From 1956 the production of this kind of newsreel/documentary style of filmmaking took off within Portugal's African colonies when colonial state administrations began to sponsor the production of *Jornais Das Actualidades* (newsreels) covering the national events of political significance in the development of colonial power. The object of these films was to focus attention on the apparatus of the colonial state, conveying information about its latest political decisions or documenting the visits of officials across colonial territory. These newsreels were also linked to 'psycho-social' campaigns to convince indigenous people not to join the liberation struggles and to recognise the benefits of Portuguese colonialism.

In Mozambique, none of the documentary films sponsored by the colonial state mentioned resistance to colonialism and each sought to justify, in the eyes of the Portuguese colonist, their place in this African country (Power and Sidaway, 2005). In these films, remarkably little filming took place outside the offices, administrative posts, industrial and commercial organisations of colonial rule and the white settlers that ran them. The 'filmic spaces' of colonial cinema were constructed almost in inverse proportion to the realities of colonial power in that they were dominated by the colonial bourgeoisie, as if the Mozambican public did not exist or was somehow temporarily absent. Thus in the dying days of colonialism the real ratio of Portuguese settlers to indigenous people was 1:10 whereas in films like the *Actualidades* we see

at least ten Portuguese settlers for every African. The images might have been of Lisbon or of any other European capital. Just as these *Actualidades* and other films sponsored by the colonial state were being made however, anti-colonial movements across Lusophone Africa were beginning to experiment with the medium themselves, to decolonise visual culture in order to project back alternative understandings and visions of the continent and its struggles. In Mozambique, films like *Venceremos!* (We will win!) (1966), *A Luta Continua* (The Struggle Continues) (1971) and *Viva Frelimo!* (1967) depict the ideological motives of the liberation war of Frelimo and were made with support from foreign filmmakers often from the socialist bloc. In Angola, Sarah Maldoror's *Sambazinga* (1972), a fictional narrative film about the Angolan liberation struggle shot in the Congo using MPLA anti-colonial guerrillas as actors, sought to legitimate nationalist discourses and to highlight colonial exploitation.

In his discussion of film spectatorship and voyeurism, Metz (1982) explores the essential property of the voyeuristic gaze as keeping the desired, seen object at a safe distance from the viewing subject and argues that cinema shows us the world at the same time as it takes it away from us: 'what defines the properly cinematographic scopopic regime is not the maintained distance, not the care exerted in maintaining it, but the sheer absence of the seen object...Cinema is...founded on an unbridgeable distance, on a total inaccessibility'. This is particularly true in the case of colonial cinematographic practice where the other is kept at a distance partly by the predominance of white faces, the sheer absence of non-white subjects and by the way in which colonial cities were depicted as entirely European spaces. The myth of a naïve, credulous and gullible African film viewer unable to differentiate between

representation and reality dominated many of the assumptions made about the reception of colonial propaganda by colonial filmmakers (Burns, 2000: Oksiloff, 2001). Movies encouraged not gazing but ‘glancing: shallow accumulative looks’ (Gordon, 2002: 215). In the 1930s, as film industries in western countries grew, misconceptions of Africa and Africans began to proliferate and perpetuated colonial modes of thinking (Murphy, 2000). Edgar Rice Burroughs’ *Tarzan* novels, which were first published in 1912, fixed the image of Africa in the American imagination as a ‘jungle playground for masculine innocence’ (Landau, 2002: 4). Western films made in the 1930s about Africa – including *Trader Horn* (1931), *Tarzan the Ape Man* (1932), *Sanders of the River* (1935), *Tarzan and his Mate* (1934), *King Solomon’s Mines* (1937), *Tarzan Finds a Son!* (1937), *Tarzan Escapes* (1936), *Four Feathers* (1939) and *Stanley and Livingstone* (1939) – reiterated this image. One of the most popular interwar movies *King Kong* (1933) revolves around the ‘travel into darkness’ motif with a scientific cinematographic expedition which ends up catching the giant ape.

Of the images employed during the 1930s, one of the most pervasive is of Africa as a dream/nightmare. Africa was presented on the one hand as a beautiful land ripe for settlement and on the other as a terrible, untamed wilderness that required taming by white men. The experience of “Africa” thus becomes another ‘inner journey’, rendering Africa as the insubstantial backdrop against which is played the drama of the European self. As the dream/nightmare begins, all certainties are dissolved and European encounters with the continent reproduce the crisis of the western subject. The colonised were portrayed as lazy and inept with the nightmare populated by ‘savage’ natives, further highlighting the need for colonisation.

Subsequent images of Africa as an untamed ‘void’, open zoo and keeper of lost treasures further encouraged white settlement. A good example is the film *Africa Speaks!* (1930, Columbia Pictures) which features the Colorado based explorer-naturalist Paul Hoeffler leading a safari into the Belgian Congo [Figure 1]. The narrative focuses on the ‘unusual’ customs and rituals of the ‘tribes’ encountered during the expedition into the ‘dark continent’ and images of these ‘tribes’ are interspersed with shots of zebras, elephants and hippos. Hoeffler's book of the same title, published shortly after the release of the film, differs insofar as the expedition actually travelled from east to west, rather than the reverse, but for purposes of visual impact actual events in the film were changed in order to produce more dramatic/cinematic action scenes. The film opens with a largely blank map of Africa and offers the viewer a journey into ‘Africa the sinister, the mysterious, the unknown...Africa the land of savagery and dangerous adventure...where nature is without mercy and deadly beasts of the jungle are supreme’. In this film “Africa” is seen to ‘speak’ for the first time by being captured on film and the continent (although not allowed to represent itself) is seen as a single entity, with a single voice. The movie also contains several scenes of the film crew – shot subsequently in California and spliced into the film – that accompanied the two hundred and fifty person expedition, seeking to underline the centrality of this medium to the exploration, penetration and colonisation of “Africa”.

Many colonial films included an ethnographic focus and encouraged viewers to glance at the bodies of native/indigenous people from a safe distance. Oksiloff (2001) has explored the visualisation of ‘primitive’ bodies in early German films, either in the ‘research films’ made by anthropologists or in colonial and adventure

films produced by the state and argues that ‘screened images of primitive bodies were in many ways more real than actual bodies, even the ones displayed in the popular live spectacles of fairs, exhibitions, and human ‘zoos’’. Other colonial films were dominated by scenes of ‘tribal dances’ (e.g. in *The Bushmen* a documentary produced during the Denver African Expedition of 1925) and other performances of primitiveness (e.g. musical or theatrical). In other films from this period missionaries, explorers, hunters and colonial authorities are often pictured (heroically) taming the jungle. Africa was thus constructed as a physical/psychological challenge, as inhospitable to whites, reinforcing a sense of the dangers of Africa for white audiences. The *au naturel* savage and the colonised servants were the ‘before’ and ‘after’ example of the effects of colonisation. Africans were portrayed as untrustworthy and shiftless: ‘[i]f there was a ‘good’ African in the film, he was defined by the characteristics admired in servants: honesty, courage, submission and unflagging loyalty’ (Murphy, 2000: 170). In many ways cinema proved to be a more cost effective way of circulating ‘primitive bodies’ and was an important ‘meeting place for science and fantasy’ (Gordon, 2002: 214).

Hollywood, as one of the most influential producers of images, ‘has always loved colonialism’ (Mayer, 2002: 3) and has had a special fondness for the British Empire in particular. The typical colonial scene would be pictured through stock figures like the ape-man, the white hunter, the colonial lady. More generally the adventure tale (a paradigmatic mode for exoticising the other) and the autobiography (a paradigmatic mode for exploring the self) continue to shape popular understandings of colonial Africa: ‘Quartermain the adventurer, Tarzan the ape-man, Hemingway’s white hunters and Baroness von Blixen’ (Mayer, 2002: 19). While it cannot be

assumed that audiences passively absorbed these representations, they were consistently bombarded with similar kinds of representations, with few significant alternatives, in ways that shaped western thinking and attitudes towards Africa as the ‘dark continent’.

5: Enacting “Africa” -- Contemporary Performances

Africa remains almost as much of a ‘dark continent’ for moviegoers today as in the past. According to Rosaldo (1993: 68) a spirit of ‘imperialist nostalgia’ emerged in the 1980s Hollywood cinema in which ‘the white colonial societies portrayed in these films appear decorous and orderly, as if constructed in accordance with the norms of classic ethnography’. Sidney Pollack’s 1985 film version of Isak Dinesen’s *Out of Africa* (originally written in 1938), for example, explicitly disclaims colonialism but endows the colonialist framework (both in Europe and in Africa) with the glamour of an exotic order of the past. The movie depicts Karen Blixen’s sojourn in Kenya largely in terms of donning the right clothes to fit in *and* stick out, being the same (as a white) *and* different (as a woman) is fetishised and overlays a subtext on the risks of going native (Mayer, 2002). Colonialism becomes a spectacle, a huge masquerade of outfits, styles and gestures against a backdrop of an exotic environment. The 1985 remake of *King Solomon’s Mines* similarly presents an Africa as cut off from the historical and political realities of imperialism in the ‘Kukuanaland’ of Rider Haggard’s original novel (written in 1885). Here Africa is staged as a timeless and familiarly ‘exotic comic-book space with African warriors in leopard skins who carry spears, cook their enemies in huge pots, play drums and – naturally - don masks...’ (Mayer, 2002: 35). While the film’s main protagonist,

Quartermain, drives a car through the desert, his African companion Umbopa, ridiculously afraid of western technology, is seen running alongside it in an “Africa” that appears as a giant US adventure theme park. The white man’s quest in the wilderness is also the theme of Clint Eastwood’s *White Hunter, Black Heart* (1990) which differentiates fact and fiction along the lines of filmmaking and hunting (its two main themes). Like so many other white hunter narratives the movie enacts the journey into the heart of darkness as a trip of self-discovery and self-fashioning. During the 1980s and 1990s Hollywood also produced a number of films about jungle life which were again reminiscent of colonial visions such as *Gorillas in the Mist* (1988) about a scientist who comes to Africa to study an endangered species, *Congo* (1995) about an expedition into the African jungle and *Greystoke* (1996) which pits a decorously vicious England against a primeval and timeless Africa. A film of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* was also made in 1994, directed by Nick Roeg.

In recent years there have been a number of movies where Africa becomes the setting for the performance of what might loosely be termed postcolonial ‘guilt’ such as *Hotel Rwanda* (2005), *The Interpreter* (2005) and *In My Country* (2005). Others like *Black Hawk Down* (2001) use Africa as a stage for imperial projections of US geopolitical imaginations (Lisle and Pepper, 2005; Carter and McCormack, 2006). The film says little about the historical or political context of the war or of Somalia more generally and the Somalis in the film are depicted as undifferentiated hordes that die in anonymous waves.

In recent years the cinematic renderings of desolation in Africa have become ever more popular. *Blood Diamond* (2006) and *The Last King of Scotland* (2006) have

gathered Oscar nominations and plaudits for their assault on Western consciences [Figure 2]. Like *The Constant Gardener* (2005), Africa functions as a backdrop for a white man's odyssey and articulations of humanitarianism and responsibility, an Africa defined by underdevelopment, suffering, death and disease. In many of these films, such as *Tears of the Sun* (2003), African voices are often submerged. What the viewer is allowed to witness in this film is the classic portrayal of 'Africans' that has been in existence since the movie industry began. Some of the timeless themes that are abundant in *Tears of the Sun* are the plot of a white woman playing saviour to the 'indigenous' population whose love and zeal for her is without limits. African men and women are here seen as helpless, afraid and devoid of any personality except in crucial moments.

Such cinematic themes are replicated in much contemporary photojournalism and documentary photography. Since the 1980s "Africa" has become synonymous with famine images and vice versa (Campbell, 2003; Campbell, Clark and Manzo, 2005) [Figure 3]. Famine images remain powerful and salient in modernity because they recall a precarious pre-modern existence that industrialised society has allegedly overcome. Understood as a natural disaster in which there is a crisis of food supply, famine is seen as a symptom of the lack of progress that results in the death of the innocent (Edkins, 2000). It is for this reason that famine images are more often than not of individuals, frequently including children, barely clothed, staring passively into the lens, flies flitting across their faces.

Content analyses of news images through time reveals that, regardless of the context in which famine has been observed, the same images recur (Moeller, 1999:

ch. 3). They recur because they are the icons of a disaster narrative, in which complex political circumstances are interpreted through an established journalistic frame of reference. As in colonial films, outsiders come from afar to dispense charity to victims of a natural disaster who are too weak to help themselves (Benthall, 1993: ch. 5). Instead of this discursive formation having to be explained in full each time, the recurrence of the iconic image of the starving child triggers this general and established understanding of famine, thereby disciplining any ambiguity about what is occurring in famine zones.

These visual performances have effects on ‘observers’ at the same time as they give meaning to the ‘observed’. Indeed, they establish a series of identity relations that reproduce and confirm notions of self/other, developed/underdeveloped, North/South, masculine/feminine, sovereignty/anarchy and the like. Given that most contemporary famine imagery comes from one continent, it reproduces the imagined geography of “Africa”, so that a continent of 900 million people in 57 countries is homogenized into a single entity represented by a starving child. It is reiterated and reinforced by the media’s use of similar imagery to depict situations like that in Darfur, even though the political violence and possible genocide in Sudan is fundamentally different to a natural disaster or humanitarian crisis (Campbell, 2007).

The performance of Africa has been taken to a new dimension by the emergence of digital technologies. Africa has not figured extensively in arcade, computer, console and mobile games but when it has the themes represented are depressingly familiar. One particular theme is ‘wilderness Africa’ as in the case of PC games like *Wildlife Tycoon: Venture Africa* (Dreamcatcher Interactive, 2006), *Zoo*

Tycoon 2: African Adventure (Microsoft, 2006), *Wild Earth Africa* (Xplosiv, 2007) and *Safari Adventures* (Global Star, 2005). In these games, which often have console equivalents, Africa is the empty container for the simulation of ecology, wildlife or wildlife management and many offer ‘safari experiences’. Online *virtual* safari tours of Africa are also now widely available. In addition to the performance of Safari and wilderness “Africa”, console games (available for hardware like the Playstation or ‘X’ Box) also often use the continent as a kind of movie backdrop or exotic setting as in the case of the spy adventure *Metal Gear* (first released in 1987) or rally games like *GTC Africa* (Majesco Games, 2002). The opening battles between ‘Master Chief’ and the ‘covenant aliens’ in the popular ‘X’ box release *Halo 2* (2005) are, for example, set on the picturesque island of Zanzibar.

The African landscape has also been the setting for a range of military adventure games such as *Call of Duty 2* (a World War Two themed game set in North Africa) and *Black Hawk Down*. There is also now a multiplayer on-line game called *Africa* (Rapid Reality Studios, 2006) where gamers pay a monthly subscription so that they can delve into a land of thirteenth century African civilisation and mythology, crossing the virtual Sahara on a camel, journeying to Timbuktu and fighting as a Zulu warrior against the lion equivalent of a werewolf. The game’s designers argue that games like this can improve players’ understandings of Africa as one of a number of self-proclaimed ‘games for change’ which seek to use the virtual spaces of the gaming world to change the way we think about and see the continent. A similar game is *Darfur is Dying* (2007) [Figure 4]. The idea for the game came out of a partnership between the Reebok Human Rights Foundation and the International Crisis Group that together launched the Darfur Digital Activist contest. Designed largely by

students at the University of Southern California in conjunction with humanitarian aid workers with experience in Darfur, the game is a narrative based simulation where the user adopts the perspective of a displaced Darfurian and negotiates the forces that threaten their chosen refugee camp. According to the game's website it 'offers a faint glimpse of what it's like for the more than 2.5 million who have been internally displaced by the crisis in Sudan'. A faint glimpse indeed. Characters must forage for water (while being chased by the Janjaweed militias) or must procure food or build shelters within the refugee camp.

6: Conclusion

In a satirical account of 'how to write about Africa' ('some tips: sunsets and starvation are good') the Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina (2006) advised: 'never have a picture of a well-adjusted African on the cover of your book, or in it, unless that African has won the Nobel Prize. An AK-47, prominent ribs, naked breasts: use these. If you must include an African, make sure you get one in Masai or Zulu or Dogon dress.' It is no surprise, given the truth of Wainaina's excoriating observations, that the majority of outsiders (more than 80% of UK respondents in one survey) view "Africa" in wholly negative terms as a place of disease, distress and instability.² The scopic regime of "Africa" has reduced and condensed the continent into a kind of exotic comic-book space, a backdrop of baseless fabric against which a series of identity relations (self/other, North/South) are staged, performed and enacted. As such, the scopic regime of "Africa", itself a 'visual performance of the social field' that establishes perceptible reality, provides the conditions of possibility for geopolitics through the relationship between site and sight it installs, thereby

structuring our encounters with other human beings in space and time (Campbell, 2007).

The scopic regime of “Africa” has thus created a place in the world marked by either war and disaster or exotic natives and animal tourism. It achieves and sustains this through the structure of iteration that is at the heart of performativity, whereby discourse produces the effect that it names through reiterative and citational practices (Campbell, 1998: 25-28, 200). The persistence of negative or exoticised imagery over time, recalling past representations in each contemporary production, stands as testament to the power of iteration [Figure 5]. Yet the problem is not so much the *presence* of such imagery, because it would be foolish to deny the actuality of much that takes place before the lens, but, rather, the *absence* of other views amongst the imagery the global visual economy transmits to citizen viewers. As Wainaina (2006) notes: ‘Taboo subjects: ordinary domestic scenes, love between Africans (unless a death is involved), references to African writers or intellectuals, mention of school-going children who are not suffering from yaws or Ebola fever or female genital mutilation.’

The easy response to this situation is to call for more ‘balanced’ or ‘positive’ views, as the World Bank did in 2003 with its photographic exhibition ‘Africa in Pictures,’ which was designed to ‘showcase another side of Africa’ (World Bank, 2003). The Bank undertook this project because of an understanding that negative perceptions of Africa lead to under-investment and poor economic growth (see Ferguson, 2006: 7 for a discussion of this analysis). Such efforts at fostering alternative images are not without merit, and the difficulty of achieving even some

distance from colonial tropes should not be underestimated.³ In this context, *National Geographic*'s September 2005 special issue on Africa is a stark reminder of the power of the scopic regime even when alternatives are sought.⁴ While the cover declares 'Africa – whatever you thought you should think again,' it also advises readers that inside is a free map of the 'wild continent.' The contents page is illustrated by four images, three of which involve fighting zebras, desert dunes and dancing pygmies. The Society's month-long focus on Africa was headlined by streamed video images from Pete's Pond in Botswana's Mashatu Game Reserve, the first colour spread in the magazine pictured a baby elephant walking through the reception of a Zambian lodge, the largest of three photographs illustrating the 'Africa in Fact' section was of a Congolese militiaman swaddled in ammunition, the Africa Quiz begins with a question about the Burrough's *Tarzan* novels and focuses on Hollywood films, and Jared Diamond's overview article privileges the continent's geography and history as determinants of its contemporary condition.⁵ To be sure, there is some attempt at a more contemporary, nuanced account of a heterogeneous place – as in the article on Nairobi, written by Binyavanga Wainaina – but when the final photograph in the magazine is an archive shot of Teddy Roosevelt posing with a rhino he shot during a 1911 safari, Wainaina's satire seems more than justified, and the structure of iteration is clear.

There are alternatives that seek to counter the power of the scopic regime of "Africa". With regard to still photography, the artistic work of Carrie Mae Weems (1995), the 'Depth of Field' collective in Lagos (World Press Photo, 2006), the exhibitions of Okwui Enwezor (2006) and the agency majorityworld.com are significant. At the same time, the pursuit of alternatives should not mean the

abandonment of compelling artistic and documentary work by the likes of Alfredo Jaar, Simon Norfolk and Gilles Peress that deals with the negatives (Norfolk, 1998; Mirzoeff, 2005). With regard to cinema, there are films that attempt to ‘shoot back’ (Thackway, 2003) alternative imaginings of “Africa” or that have situated themselves within the traditions of ‘third cinema’. These films are increasingly gaining international recognition, particularly through the contributions of African filmmakers like Ousmane Sembene, Idrissa Ouedraogo, Haile Gerima, Djibril Diop Mambéty, Soulemane Cissé and Safi Faye (amongst many others). Many seek to revisit and reinterpret colonial history (often satirically) or seek to unsettle and disturb the nostalgic recollection in ‘western’ films of an (illusory) exotic order of white colonial societies. They do so by envisioning resistances to colonialism or the circumstances of its demise or rebirth as neocolonialism. The scopic regime of Africa establishes the conditions of possibility for an ethical response to the events and issues it makes available. It makes “Africa” a place in the world that is most often understood as an object of humanitarianism or a destination for exotic tourism, with little in between. There remains a need to displace and unsettle the historical frames that occlude so much of the continent’s richness and diversity. At the same time it must be ensured that alternative framings expand to fill that space in-between and in turn denaturalize the scopic regime and make possible other responses.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Critical work on world's fairs has examined a wide range from nineteenth century Stockholm (Pred, 1985) and the Swiss tradition of world's fair (Soderstrom, 2001), via inter-war Paris (Gouda, 1995; Strohmayer, 1996) and Johannesburg (Robinson, 2002) to late twentieth century Seville (Harvey, 1996) and Lisbon (Power and Sidaway, 2005). Much of this scholarship has emphasised imperial spectacles and visual displays as powerful frameworks through which the public learned to envision the colonial order.

² There are a number of media studies that demonstrate the pervasiveness of this negative imagery and its effects on understandings of the global South. For downloadable copies of studies by the UK Department for International Development, the International Broadcasting Trust, 3WE and the VSO, see http://www.imaging-famine.org/gov_ngo.htm (accessed 4 July 2007). The figure of 80% of UK respondents comes from the 2001 VSO report *The Live Aid Legacy*.

³ For the efforts of one of the authors (in conjunction with his curatorial collaborators), see the 'Africa Uncovered' section of the *Imaging Famine* project at <http://www.imaging-famine.org/africa/au.htm> (accessed 4 July 2007).

⁴ The rationale for the issue is revealingly described in a multimedia interview with the editor, available at <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/0509/editor.html> (accessed 28 April 2008).

⁵ The live web stream had ended, but highlights are still available at 'Wild Cam Africa,' <http://www9.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/wildcamafrika/> (accessed 4 July 2007).