

COLONIALISM, EMIGRATION AND THE IMPERMANENCE OF IMAGES: A LATENT TRUTH BELOW FOG LEVEL

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In analogue photography, an image is created when photons of light strike the film, affecting the silver halide crystals that cover it. The image is thus left waiting to be developed, when it is transformed into pure metallic silver. Until then, it is a latent image. Any part of the image that is underexposed is said to be below fog level, meaning that there is no information there that can be revealed.

When we shoot a film, we record what we see, but there is information added to the image that travels with it, incognito, unbeknownst to us. Archive footage often has a life independent of its author; it is like an orphan that nevertheless contains an interpretable genetic and cultural code. This is why films taken by Europeans in the colonies in the 19th century revolt today against their creators, revealing an image, latent for many years, of exploitation of the Other, of supposed racial, cultural and religious superiority.

This article analyses the latent information in colonial images and connects it with the theory of

the colonality of power developed by the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano. Reinterpreted, these images offer a snapshot of Eurocentrism. At the same time, this study identifies a connection between colonialism and contemporary emigration by analysing various examples of films that reinterpret colonial images or that use archive footage to explore emigration and the mark that it leaves on families. The films analysed include *Moeder Dao, de schildpadgelijkende* (Vincent Monnikendam, 1995), *Immagini dell'Oriente: turismo da vanda-li* (Yervant Gianikian, Angela Ricci Lucchi, 2001), *African Mirror* (Mischa Hedinger, 2019), *Leur Algérie* (Lina Soualen, 2020), *Radiograph of a Family* (Firouzeh Khosrovani, 2020) and *We Were So Beloved...* (Manfred Kirchheimer, 1986). The article concludes with a differentiation of the function of archive footage as an illustration or evocation of the past from its use as an archaeology or ontology of the image, considering the deteriorating effect that time has on film and its spectral nature.

ARCHIVES AS A GENRE

Cinéma vérité is essentially a way of recording a moment that is only really captured as a reflection, a shadow of what we were a second earlier. The succession of images reproducing a presence in the present still belongs to the past, even if it is the contemporary past. In this sense, there is very little difference between an image taken of you today and an image of your grandparents taken decades ago. Both essentially tell the same story and will be ontologically the same in a few years, even if we are better off ignoring the fact.

As Jaimie Baron suggests, any image will turn into archive material eventually, unless it disappears altogether before it gets the chance (2013: 21). With a bit of luck, many of our photographs, films shot on Super 8, or digital videos will end up in film libraries, forgotten in an attic somewhere, or displayed anonymously at a flea market. They will lie in wait for someone to discover them and use them to tell a story quite different from the original. Reading Hall (2001), images of the past can serve to shed light on history and attempt to reconstruct it, albeit always only ever in a partial and biased way, invoking their status as evidence, the certainty of existence asserted by every image (notwithstanding their interpretation). But they can also serve for reflecting on images themselves, on their referential value, on concepts like time and space or the culture that created them.

Esfir Shub was a pioneer in the use of archive footage for the purposes of historical reconstruction. Her 1927 film *Padenie dinastii Romanovykh* (Fall of the Romanov Dynasty) exposed the distance between the rulers and the people in Tsarist Russia, a gap that led to the Revolution of 1917. It is worth highlighting that for Shub the footage she was working with was relatively contemporary, generally no more than 15 years old. Its value for her was therefore essentially demonstrative.

The use of archive material to illustrate a supposed historical truth has been a method

adopted by countless filmmakers since Shub's ground-breaking work. Most of us have grown up watching films about World War II created using old black-and-white footage with voiceover narration. In such films, archive material adopted its traditional role of evidence of something that happened and support for a persuasive argument related to a major historical event, although the end result is still a mythologised history. Archives are even used as proof of some aspect of the past that is reproduced and self-justified in the present (Hallam & Roberts, 2011).

But there are other possible readings. Images do not always show what we think we see. Actions we film at one point in time, when they do not originally form part of a closed narrative—and sometimes even when they do—can reveal different information that we were not aware of. Time changes everything, including cultural codes and the way we interpret images. What we think is right in one era may cease to be so years later. The revision of footage filmed by imperial authorities in their colonies from 1895 up until those colonies won their independence provides evidence of this.

IMAGES OF COLONIALISM

A few years before the Lumière brothers invented their cinematograph in 1895, the European powers met at the Berlin Conference to agree on the terms of their effective occupation of the African continent. Thus, after slavery had been abolished, the exploitation of Africa's native populations and riches was legitimised. The Congo, as the personal property of King Leopold II of Belgium, was a paradigmatic example. With the exception of Abyssinia (Ethiopia) and Liberia, the entire African continent was divided up between France, Britain, Germany, Portugal, Spain and Belgium. This was of course in addition to all the other possessions of these and other empires across the globe, such as the Dutch, the Ottoman, or the vast Russian empire, in an imperial club that would be joined

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at the end of the century by the United States and Japan. The rise of empire at the end of the 19th century was due to the expansionist needs for raw materials brought by the Industrial Revolution, and to the rise of nationalism.

Photography,¹ and later cinema, documented the dominated countries extensively, for anthropological, propagandistic or exoticising purposes. As Santana Pérez (2011: 22) argues:

From the outset, the primordial conception of photography was not as a pastime or a form of artistic expression; rather, its purpose was clearly to fulfil a social, military and political function. It would become an effective tool in the hands of European and American colonialism and imperialism.

Keenly aware of the power of the camera as a propaganda tool, government departments created in the 1930s in Belgium, France and Britain used film to produce colonial propaganda (such as the Belgian Fonds Colonial de la Propagande Économique et Social). In Spain, the country's colonial mission in Equatorial Guinea was promoted in some of the *NO-DO* newsreels made by the Franco regime. Odattey-Wellington mentions the case of a production company named Hispania VTR that wrote a letter in 1926 to the Spanish governor of the island of Fernando Po "proposing to film a documentary titled *Cinematographic Information on Fernando Po*," which would be "the most beautiful propaganda that could ever be made about our possessions in the Gulf of Guinea" (2015: 62). But what story did these images really

tell? In reality, it was a story of prejudice and capitalist exploitation, as Odattey-Wellington (2015: 61) explains:

Documentary film is constructed on asymmetrical power and subjugation, sometimes concealed, engendered by the marginalisation and exoticisation of the foreign culture. The documentary and other media for capturing images, such as photography, are useful tools for imperialism.

This revision of the past ties in with the influential decolonising work of Frantz Fanon (1961) and Albert Memmi (1957) and subsequent explorations in post-colonial studies by Edward Said (1978) and Walter Dignolo (1995), among others. From this perspective, after the independence of most colonies during the second half of the 20th century, colonial history and the images that served to justify it have been reinterpreted. Two notable examples of this are Vincent Monnikendam's *Moeder Dao, de schildpadgelijkende* (Mother Dao, the Turtlelike) (1995), and the films of Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi. Both of these examples are discussed below.

Moeder Dao, de schildpadgelijkende uses archive footage taken in the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia) between 1912 and 1933, filmed by Dutch businessmen and settlers to document their way of life and work in their factories. The main intention was to demonstrate the effectiveness of colonisation: how modern their factories were, how well their employees worked, or how their religion had saved the native population. The settlers had brought Western customs, music, transportation, education and healthcare. However, what the images reveal sixty years later is the settlers' ignorance of the culture, religion, and ancestral customs of the Indonesians. We see businessmen dressed in white and wearing the classic pith helmets; priests trying to cross rivers that are strange to them, falling in and finally being carried by locals; shivering children receiving baptism with sombre expressions on their faces (whether for the importance of the moment of official accept-



Figure 1. Still frame from *Moeder Dao, de schildpadgelijkende*

ance into the faith or out of pure terror we cannot tell); priests trying to put together a Western music band with a group of Indonesian youths; locals on a production line working mechanically while gazing fearfully at the camera. It is thus footage that reveals a truth quite different from what was originally intended.

Monnikendam's extraordinary film (figure 1), with its skilful use of sound and editing, is also a product of its time. The director places the world of Indonesia's natives in opposition to the colonial invasion using a legend that tells the mythical origins of the world, while the soundtrack is often used as a counterpoint that supports the re-interpretation of the images. For example, in one sequence we see a priest instructing a group of young people in the catechism while we hear Gregorian chants, added by Monnikendam, mixed with jungle sounds, thereby reinforcing the absurd nature of the missionary project. As Santana Pérez argues, missionaries used photography "to bear witness to their Christian actions and to the 'great achievement' of their evangelism of the indigenous population. Photography had to praise the greatness of Christ in these virgin lands and the 'valour' and serenity of his instruments, the missionaries" (2011: 23).

At another moment in the film, a tracking shot takes us down a long passage while we hear a low noise typical of a horror scene. We are inside a hospital. The images that follow, to the same sound, are difficult to look at: children and babies covered in blisters and rashes, and people with parts of their bodies eaten up by ulcers or leprosy sores. Despite the psychological impact of the images, the horror of this scene facilitates a different reading, not documented in the footage: that colonisation exploited the indigenous people, constituting a great evil that also brought disease and death, but one of the few positives may have been the work of doctors and nurses. The images in *Mother Dao, the Turtlelike* leave no doubt as to the effects of colonialism and demonstrate that the past is always open to interpretation, as is the film itself.

Archive images provide the raw material for all the analytical and political work of Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi, who appropriate found footage to give it new meanings. In *Dal Polo all'Equatore* (From the Pole to the Equator) (1986), they work with the huge volume of footage taken by the pioneering Italian filmmaker Luca Comerio (1874-1940), who was appointed camera operator to the king. Comerio filmed the arrival of Italian forces in Libya in 1911 and safaris from the South Pole up to Africa, only to spend his final years forgotten and in penury. Seventy years later, Gianikian and Lucchi re-filmed his still frames, acid stains included, to tell a story very different from

THE SETTLERS HAD BROUGHT WESTERN CUSTOMS, MUSIC, TRANSPORTATION, EDUCATION AND HEALTHCARE. HOWEVER, WHAT THE IMAGES REVEAL SIXTY YEARS LATER IS THE SETTLERS' IGNORANCE OF THE CULTURE, RELIGION AND ANCESTRAL CUSTOMS OF THE INDONESIANS

the one imagined by Comerio: a critique of imperialism and colonialism. This, along with critiques of war and physical, social and political violence, constitutes the core of their filmography.

At the beginning of another, later film, *Immagini dell'Oriente: turismo da vandali* (Images of the Orient: Vandal Tourism) (2001) an intertitle with a quote by Giovanna Marini signals the direction the film will take: "The white man possesses a quality that has led him down the road: a lack of respect. The white man stops for nothing." These lines, chanted by a single voice like a prayer, is repeated over footage of rich maharajahs on a boat, together with rich white men. The images take us on a journey around India, where the white men are welcomed and honoured by the country's powerful. We see parades, marching elephants (figure 2), parties, white men visiting cities and monuments, drinking tea and being attended by servants; but we also see ragged children staring at the camera and working in the fields. The music and chanted lines serve to punctuate images shown in slow motion, in different tones, reframed, or as negatives. All of this has an alienating effect that serves to sharpen our gaze, making us notice details, and reflect on our own era rather than being transported to another time. Instead of historical evidence of the past, what this found footage offers is a new reading that brings them into the present so that we can see something of ourselves. Indeed, the tourism of the elite shown in the images is close to our mass tourism today, which treats the world as a spectacle rather than a place for human engagement. It is a tourist trip to the former colonies whose other side is the contemporary phenomenon of emigration to the former imperial metropolises.

Monnikendamm's film and the work of Gianikian and Lucchi are both intimately related to decoloniality, a concept theorised most extensively by Aníbal Quijano, who argues that rather than ending with the end of coloniality, colonialism has continued thanks to economic imperialism



Figure 2. Still frame from *Immagini dell'Oriente: turismo da vandali*

and globalisation, and that it is intrinsically linked to power. The theory of decoloniality offers a critical view of Eurocentrism and a conception of the world based on the ideas of race and capitalism. According to this idea, the countries that were colonised, beginning with Latin America, need to liberate themselves from the legacy of Eurocentric power that still holds sway in their economies, cultures and societies, starting with the notions of race and the nation-state.

According to Quijano, in the conquest of the Americas

the colonisers codified the phenotypical features of the colonised in terms of colour and adopted this as the emblematic characteristic of the category of race. This codification was probably first established in the British colonies of North America. Blacks there were the most important exploited group, as most of the economy relied on their labour; but

they were also the most important colonised race, as the indigenous peoples did not form part of that colonial society. Consequently, the dominant peoples called themselves ‘whites’ (2000: 246).

The work of René Gardi, which will be discussed below, exemplifies this prevailing Eurocentric attitude.

DECOLONISING THE COLONISER’S GAZE

Gardi was a Swiss writer and filmmaker known in the 1960s for his African travel books and films like *Mandara* (1959) and *Die letzte Karawane* (The Last Caravan) (1967). Sixty years later, another Swiss filmmaker, Mischa Hedinger, made *African Mirror* (2019), a film that revises footage shot by Gardi in Cameroon in the 1940s and 1950s, without altering it, but by interspersing it with interviews that Gardi gave on Swiss television and reflections written in his diaries. As the title suggests, the association of all these elements and the passage of time reveals that what these films really reflect is a paternalist, colonial gaze. Gar-

di idealised northern Cameroon and the region of Mandara, while underestimating the capacity of the Africans to adapt to change. His failure to view the Africans as equals reflects the prejudices described by Gutiérrez Rodríguez (2018:17):

Colonial difference is based on the idea that the colonised population is fundamentally different and inherently inferior to the colonisers. It conceives of the Other as radically unassimilable, oscillating between positions of strangeness and similarity. Immigration policies reiterate this racialised objectification reminiscent of colonial times.

In this way, images that years ago formed part of a closed narrative now reveal the Eurocentric, colonial mentality concealed below the fog level of a supposedly well-intentioned anthropological gaze. Gardi’s footage (figure 3) is used in *African Mirror* as a cumulation of evidence to construct a subtle argument: ultimately, how we film and how we look is always a reflection of our own preconceptions. When we look at others, we see our own self-portrait.

This idea of race, of an opposition between “whites” and others, whether African, indigenous or Asian, between rulers and ruled, is what Quijano argues supported the construction of Europe “as a new identity” and the expansion of European colonialism around the world. The colonial project required a system of production, exploitation and product distribution articulated “around the capital-wage relationship [...] and the global market. Included in this system were slavery, servitude, small-scale commercial production, reciprocity and wages [...]. In this way, a structure of production relations was established that was new, original and unique in world history: global capitalism” (2000: 2).

Traditional colonialism ended when the colonies gained independence, but this did not end their dependence on colonial power structures. This is reflected in emigration and the attitude towards it in the former colonising nations, as the very idea of the nation-state, according to

Figure 3. René Gardi filming





Figure 4. Aïcha and Mabrouk in *Leur Algérie*

Quijano, was constructed based on criteria of supposed homogeneity and identity. Thus, these nations view emigration, coming mostly from the former colonies, involving other races, as a source of instability. Yet this immigration is partly the result of colonialism and of the inequalities generated by this “colonial power matrix”, as will be explored below.

FAMILY MEMORIES AND TRAUMAS OF EMIGRATION

Emigration is conceived of as a dream, a promise, and a need. Behind this conception lies the reality of the journey and the difficulties associated with the adaptation process. In the new country, the old homeland becomes an idealised place to which the emigrant hopes to return. However, in most cases the return never happens or the homeland fails to live up to the ideal because the emigration experience has left an indelible mark. This new reality of emigration and the difficulties adapting inherent in the foreigner’s experience are evident in the two films analysed below. Both use archives to look back on the past, but in very different ways, in terms of both how they reconstruct memory and the reasons for the failure to adapt. The first deals with an Algerian family of humble origins whose dream to return to their homeland turns into a worn-out myth that ulti-

mately fades away; the second deals with a well-off Iranian family who, on returning to Iran, confront the opposite problem of adapting to their homeland. Both films end in separation and it is only the daughter or the granddaughter who is able to exorcise the ghosts of the past, free of a single national and cultural identity.

In *Leur Algérie* (2020), the director Lina Soualem films her grandparents, Aïcha and Mabrouk, a pair of Algerian emigrants who have lived in France for more than sixty years and are now separated (figure 4). With her camera in hand, Soualem asks them about their past, how they met, their wedding night, the reasons why they emigrated, why they separated and why they have never returned to Algeria. The granddaughter talks to her grandparents and constructs their memories by mixing the conversations with family archive footage, some of which was taken by her father years ago, or with excerpts from the documentary *La Guerre d’Algérie* (1972) by Yves Courrière and Philippe Monier. She also uses numerous old photographs and home movies, and films some of the reactions (such as her grandmother’s nervous laugh) triggered by watching the footage or by her insistent questions. Her father, a theatre actor, helps her and thus becomes a third character. He himself is afflicted by the dream of returning to a mythologised Algeria, a dream he has never realised. The reality was France and the silence of emigration.

Soualem films her grandfather visiting the old knife factory where he worked all his life, with a nostalgic yearning for the past and, without realising it, for one of the constants of the colonial and post-colonial world: factories and manual labour. It was a phenomenon that spread across Europe in the 20th century, as Encarnación Gutiérrez (2018: 17) points out:

In the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s, subjects of the British colonies in the Caribbean and the Indian subcontinent came to the UK. These British citizens were seen as outsiders in the nation and

were constructed as immigrants. In France in the 1950s, a similar situation occurred when the citizens of the French colonies in North Africa came to Metropolitan France. The presence of these (former) colonial subjects in the seat of the empire challenged the public myth that the European nation-states were isolated from the networks of colonialism and imperialism.

This incongruence finds expression in these old emigrants. The Algerian grandfather represents work in the Thiers factory and behind this there is nothing but his silence. The grandmother represents the home and dedication to the family. We see her in the kitchen looking at archive material or videos of weddings and family reunions. These two dimensions, the workplace and the home, form the binary of emigration, as the sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad (2010: 165) argues:

There are two essential dimensions that structure the whole condition of the worker's existence: the workplace and the home. All his life, all of his greatest claims involve these two dimensions. [...] This is the specific nature of the immigrant worker, and therein lies much of the history of immigration.

Soualem thus speaks to us of the impoverished background of her grandparents and their ancestors in Algeria, while also illustrating the disparate nature of their personalities: the silent, curt grandfather, and the lively, cheerful grandmother. Little by little she constructs a family portrait while immersing us in the history of French colonisation, of the exploitation and repression of the Algerian people and the emigration that kept France's factories running. The archive images serve to conjure up the past and as a catalyst, as the director herself suggests with reference to the footage from *La Guerre d'Algérie* (1972): "It was to be able to talk about Algeria and the political context with my grandparents and to position them in history, particularly in relation to the Sétif massacre in 1945, because they were still in Algeria and lived just 20 kilometres from there. Showing

those images to my grandmother was a way of re-activating her memory a little."²

Leur Algérie contrasts the country left behind with the country dreamed of, turning the dream into mundane, prosaic reality, and what was real in the past into a mythologised memory. The old Algerian immigrants are the consequence of a particular French policy. After colonisation and emigration, the dream of returning home will never be realised. We are also confronted with the difficulty foreigners have adapting and assimilating in a nation-state constructed according to particular patterns of identity. As Abdelmalek Sayad (2010: 168) suggests:

Immigration requires the existence of national borders and territories; it requires the existence of foreigners. The figure of the foreigner itself compels us to talk about the nation state.

Figure 5. The parents in *Radiograph of a Family*



Sayad (2010: 168) also points out the absurdity of the foreigner's naturalisation process, which is dependent on an arbitrary act:

At ten minutes to midnight, a person is Algerian; at one minute after midnight—that is, when the act appears in the Official Gazette—he is French. It is an act of magic on which naturalisation is constructed.

This sleight of hand has practical consequences of extraordinary significance for the emigrant, but it does not turn that emigrant into a different person. It would not be until the third generation, the director's, that the two nationalities—Algerian and French, as well as Palestinian—can coexist without coming into conflict with each other. *Leur Algerie* portrays the dissonances of the emigrant experience and the contradictions of the receiving country. The two separate homes of the filmmaker's grandparents seem to symbolise the difficulty of reconciling two territories, the practical reality of a life in France and the emotional connection to Algeria, without really belonging to one or the other. The act of emigration itself caused a rift that is hard to heal. But returning is not easy either, as will be discussed below.

Firouzeh Khosrovani takes us on a journey in the opposite direction in her film *Radiograph of a Family* (2020), in terms of both her way of using archive footage and the subject of the film itself: the effect that ideological differences have on a family. The director tells the story of her parents (figure 5), how they met and got married (her mother had her wedding in Tehran with only a photograph of the groom, as he was studying medicine in Switzerland at the time), the prosperous life in Europe, the vacations in the snow, the parties, the jazz, and the subsequent return to Iran and what this meant for the family. She thus reconstructs a part of the inner history of the Iranian diaspora of the 1960s. It is also the story of two misfits: her mother, faithful to very strict traditions, is unable to accept Switzerland's secular society and liberal values, while her father, accustomed to the Euro-

pean lifestyle and culture, cannot integrate into the fundamentalist society of the Ayatollahs after his return to Iran. In this way, Khosrovani shows us two polarised positions: a liberal man with a love of art and a religious woman who follows the path of the Islamic revolution and finds her destiny there. Unlike the grandparents in *Leur Algerie*, the parents in *Radiograph of a Family* stay together in the same home in Tehran, yet at the same time they are in reality irrevocably separated, because Khosrovani's father is a stranger in his own home; his emigration experience was a one-way journey, as the country he returns to is not the one he left.

It is important here to consider the historical context: in the 1950s, Iran's democratically elected prime minister, Mohammed Mosaddegh, nationalised the oil industry. In response, the British and American secret services orchestrated a coup in 1953 to depose Mosaddegh and replace him with Shah Reza Pahlavi. This would be the first coup d'état organised by the CIA in a foreign country, an act of post-colonial domination in this case for the benefit of the oil company BP (British Petroleum).³ It was in those years that Khosrovani's father emigrated to Switzerland to study medicine, specialising in radiology. In 1979, after her father had returned to his family in Iran, the Shah's dictatorial monarchy was overthrown by the people's revolution instigated by the Shiites, and the Islamic Republic was established. In this revolutionary context, the mother would find her life's purpose in religion.

To reconstruct the relationship between her parents and to show the clash between two different conceptions of the world, the filmmaker uses the voices of an actress (for her mother) and an actor (for her father) who read letters and perform dialogues written by the director herself. These scripts are combined with 140 family snapshots and excerpts from home movies shot by friends and family on Super 8 and 16mm film. But in addition to this footage, we see images of anonymous

men and women, who under other circumstances could have been her parents, taken from Iranian and Swiss television broadcasts showing life in the 1950s and 1960s. The archives thus become a vehicle for imagining what their past could have been, while suggesting other lives and other possible stories parallel to the lives of her parents. In the same way, the hypothetical dialogues are reconstructed to suggest a past known well to the director, who personifies herself as a little girl painting over the broken pictures of her family to refashion their faces and figures, or hiding from the explosions in the streets of Tehran during the revolution. The archive material thus serves not only for illustration but also for suggestion.

The memory recalled is simply a narration, a construction made out of fragments of reality. But the referential use of archives, rather than inserting them for the purpose of illustration or evidence, inspires trust. Behind the fictional elements, a genuine memory thus emerges, just as the poetic form reveals the reality behind it. The journey and the return both result in alienation, as the mother cannot adapt to a new country and culture because her firm connection to her own country and culture prevents it, while the father, whose return becomes a kind of internal exile, is a stranger in his own land. Ideology is a difficult barrier to cross, sometimes even harder than geographical distance.

ARCHIVES AS EVOCATION AND SURVIVAL

Throughout history, emigration, exile and diaspora have appeared as different sides of the same phenomenon: people who are forced to leave their family, their home and their country to begin a new life. One of the most noteworthy examples of this can be found in *We Were So Beloved* (1986) by the American filmmaker Manfred Kirchheimer, a film that offers one of the most accurate portraits of the emigration of Jews from Nazi Germany.

The film presents the Jewish community of Washington Heights, a neighbourhood located in Upper Manhattan. Curiously, the neighbourhood owes its name to Fort Washington, built to hold back the British troops during the American War of Independence (1775-1783). From 1933, when Hitler took power in Germany, a large number of Jewish families, followed later by concentration camp survivors, emigrated to this neighbourhood. Fifty years later, Kirchheimer interviewed these emigrants, talking to them with the intimacy of a friend and neighbour. His father, who is featured in the documentary, emigrated to the United States in 1936, recognising the troubling signs for the future in Saarbrücken, taking his family with him.

The director was just five years old when he arrived in New York. His own history entitles him to sit down with these witnesses and to use his own reflections, spoken in a voiceover, to guide the narration. The intimacy of the setting, as the characters are interviewed in their homes, talking in the kitchen or on the sofa, makes them seem comfortable despite the tragedy they are describing. The oral narration, the force of the word to bring the memory to life, in a manner similar to the testimonies in Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985), guides a narrative in which close-ups and medium shots display their full force. However,

Figure 6. Still frame of happiness lost in *We Were So Beloved*



unlike Lanzmann, who was radically opposed to the inclusion of any archive footage as a tool for reconstructing the past, Kirchheimer makes use of archives to reconstruct part of the life of a community, to create the atmosphere, the spirit of an era. The footage is not used for the purpose of illustration, or to support a persuasive argument, but simply for the purpose of evocation. The intention is not to demonstrate but to imagine what was and what could not be.

Testimonies and photographs (figure 6) piece together the life of a perfectly integrated community whose members refused to believe that they, German Jews, could suffer the same fate as their counterparts in Poland; that they were so German that some of them would not have hesitated to enlist in the Hitler Youth if they had been allowed, as Max Frankel, the editor of the *New York Times* and a friend of the director's, openly admits.

Instead of illustrating an era, the archival material evokes a loss. During shots of photographs of different families in the 1930s, dressed in the bourgeois style of the period, the director comments in a voiceover: "Here, even those who were orthodox could not easily be told apart from their Christian compatriots. They dressed modishly,

they did not know Yiddish, they were not ghettoized, and lived among their neighbours." The director's own family could trace their history back to the 17th century and the arrival of the Jews in Germany 1,700 years earlier. In 1930, there were half a million Jews in Germany. Little by little, they were turned into another race, persecuted and forced to flee. Not even the rabbis could believe it, and they recommended against leaving Germany, as one interviewee recalls. The Jewish community was so integrated that despite the events unfolding, some people still had friends there and even understood certain attitudes. For example, Melitta Hess says to her son, Walter Hess, after telling him he should forgive the Nazis: "I don't know if I were out, maybe you would have gotten a brown suit on, and maybe you would look pretty good, to save your life."

Walter Hess himself acknowledges that what he regrets most about Nazism was the fact that it instilled a feeling of inferiority in him. In terms of its consequences, Nazism was also a colonising ideology in keeping with what Osterhammel and Jansen call "the fulfilment of a universal mission," referring to the fact that after the 16th century European expansion was presented "as a contribution to a divine plan that had to be executed among the heathen, as a secular mandate for colonialism to 'civilise' the 'barbarians' or 'savages', as the 'white man's burden', etc. The conviction in European cultural superiority was always invoked as the rationale" (2019: 20).

But the film doesn't shy away from issues of racism or classism within the Jewish community itself, as German Jews distinguished themselves from Polish Jews, whom they sometimes looked down on. One witness responds to a question from the director by remarking that American Jews have no right to speak negatively about the arrival of Hispanic immigrants to the United States, as they themselves suffered the consequences of racial stigmatisation. This raises the question of whether such racism is specifically contextual or

UNCLAIMED IMAGES HAVE A HIGH PROBABILITY OF BECOMING ARCHIVAL MATERIAL, TESTIMONIES THAT WILL BE REINTERPRETED IN SOME FAR-OFF FUTURE, IF THEY MANAGE TO SURVIVE. EVEN FOOTAGE THAT HAS BEEN FILMED AS A LINK IN A NARRATIVE CHAIN MAY SOME DAY BE USED IN ISOLATION, AS EVIDENCE OR TO REVEAL CULTURAL PATTERNS OR HIDDEN PREJUDICES. A NEW GAZE MAY UNCOVER INFORMATION THAT IS STILL LATENT, BELOW THE FOG LEVEL OF THE IMAGE

something more dangerous, more inherent in human nature.

More than a film about the atrocities of the extermination camps, *We Were So Beloved* is a portrait of a community of people who never wanted to leave their homeland, who were not in financial need, but who merely had a different background. These were people who lost all their belongings, their savings, and ultimately their family members. They lost so much that most of the photographs shown in the film are the few that survived. In the final scene we see the director together with a survivor, showing a picture of her parents and her two sisters, who died in Theresienstadt. They are shown happy and smiling in the black and white image, blissfully unaware of what was to come. We who look from the present have the advantage of knowing their future. They hadn't even been able to hold onto that photograph. The daughter, the only survivor, received it later from her aunt, after coming to America. Archives acquire this quality not just of a trace, of an evocation of a lost future, but of resistance, of a fleeting moment of survival.

ALL FILM WILL BECOME ARCHIVAL

Figure 7. The couple from *The Bells* in *Light is Calling*



What will be left of our films and photographs? How will our history be read? Unclaimed images have a high probability of becoming archival material, testimonies that will be reinterpreted in some far-off future, if they manage to survive. Even footage that has been filmed as a link in a narrative chain may some day be used in isolation, as evidence or to reveal cultural patterns or hidden prejudices. A new gaze may uncover information that is still latent, below the fog level of the image.

But material stored in film libraries or private collections is also in a process of constant transformation. Archival material can be used to explore its own essence: the constant deterioration of the celluloid that reflects the impermanence of all matter. The original purpose of the material is secondary, whether it was fiction or documentary, or whether it was about travel, empires, or emigration. All these images were believed to hold the moment, yet all of them will vanish, devoured by time.

In his short film *Light Is Calling* (2004), Bill Morrison makes use of excerpts from a silent film, James Young's *The Bells* (1926), with old footage on which much of the image has corroded. In the frame-by-frame animation we can make out a woman's face and a young soldier (figure 7), a carriage, a love story amid acid spots that move in a manner similar to Stan Brakhage's dyed and scratched images. The result is closer to abstract expressionism than mainstream cinema. But there is a narrative: not so much a love story as a story about two people who once acted in a silent film, who became fictional characters and who have now become a painting, in pure form, disappearing into nothingness, into spirits, into a chemical reaction.

It is in this treatment of images of the past that archives find their true essence, in the passage of time acting on the material and transcending it. The reality is this footage of moments of happiness, of people who have doubted, worked, and

loved, who we know have died and who have therefore also suffered. The essence of the images is in displaying the people themselves, their existence, fading and disappearance; their meaning lies in the relationship with the person who looks at them without being able to escape the specular nature of the image, transcending it. The anecdote becomes the essence. Is in this sense where de decolonial reflection made by Aníbal Quijano becomes relevant: when archive images transform anecdotes into essences, they legitimize homogenization dynamics of colonial societies. As Ann Laura Stoler (2010) affirms, when we treat archives as processes and not as objects, we make emerge the logics that convert images of a time into the essence and the normal and, thus, their analysis unmasks how colonial dynamics forged.

Reality is not merely the historical fact, whether of colonialism or emigration, travellers or mere weekend tourists. It is that same past contained in the images, those faces that are no longer present but that lived the series of events, just as we do now. The essence of archives is also the awareness that these people are now only imprints on chemical or electronic material, a representation in a state of transformation. A similar idea was narrated by the writer Adolfo Bioy Casares in *The Invention of Morel* (1940). In this novel, the images of a few long-dead tourists are reproduced on an island using Morel's machine. The machine reproduces them as if they were real, although they know that they can also die if the machine, blown by the wind, should break down. All of this is observed by the island's sole inhabitant, who is in love with one of the images. When he dies, he in turn will become an image, together with the woman he loves.

In the same way, old images have a kind of mummified quality, as their corrosions and scratches are like strips of linen cloth. They speak to us from the afterlife, not only about what happened in the past, but also about what is happening now. It is happening to us at this very moment.

Even while we are alive, we are disappearing. That is the most dreadful fact of all. ■

NOTES

- 1 Even the explorer John Hanning Speke took cameras on his journey to find the source of the Nile, as did Charles Livingstone, the brother of the famous explorer (Santana Pérez, 2011: 27).
- 2 Interview with Lina Soualem by Fabien Lemercier. Lina Soualem. Réalisatrice de *Leur Algérie*. "J'avais besoin de briser ce silence." *Visions du Réel* 2020. Cineuropa. 05/05/2020. <https://cineuropa.org/fr/interview/388163/>
- 3 Taghi Amirani's film *Coup 53* (2019) documents the intervention of MI6 and the CIA to overthrow Mosaddegh and regain control of the oil industry for British Petroleum, formerly the Anglo-Persian Oil Company.

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Filmography

- African Mirror (2019). 1h 24min. Dir: Mischa Hedinger
- Dal Polo all'Equatore (1986). 96 min. Dir: Yervant Gianikian & Angela Ricci Lucchi
- Immagini dell'Oriente: turismo da vandali (2001). 62 min. Dir: Yervant Gianikian & Angela Ricci Lucchi
- La Guerre d'Algérie (1975) 2h 34 min. Dir: Philippe Monnier & Yves Courrière
- Leur Algérie (2020). 1h 12min. Dir: Lina Soualem
- Light Is Calling (2004). 7 min. Dir: Bill Morrison
- Moeder Dao, de schildpadgelijkende (1995). 90 min. Dir: Vincent Monnikendam
- Padenie dinastii Romanovykh (1927). 90 min. Dir: Esfir Shub
- Radiograph of a Family (2020). 82 min. Dir: Firouzeh Khosrovani
- Shoah (1985). 9h. Claude Lanzmann
- We Were So Beloved (1986). 2h 25 min. Dir: Manfred Kirchheimer

COLONIALISM, EMIGRATION AND THE IMPERMANENCE OF IMAGES: A LATENT TRUTH BELOW FOG LEVEL

Abstract

This article considers the latent information in colonial images and connects it with the theory of the colonality of power developed by the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano. Reinterpreted, these images offer a snapshot of Eurocentrism. At the same time, this study identifies a connection between colonialism and contemporary emigration by analysing various examples of films that reinterpret colonial images or that use archive footage to explore emigration and the mark that it leaves on families. The films analysed include *Moeder Dao, de schildpadgelykende* (Vincent Monnikendam, 1995), *Immagini dell'Oriente: turismo da vandali* (Yervant Gianikian, Angela Ricci Lucchi, 2001), *African Mirror* (Mischa Hedinger, 2019), *Leur Algérie* (Lina Soualen, 2020), *Radiograph of a Family* (Firouzeh Khosrovani, 2020) and *We Were So Beloved* (Manfred Kirchheimer, 1986).

Key words

Archive; Colonialism; Emigration; Decoloniality; Documentary film.

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IMPERMANENCIA DE LAS IMÁGENES, COLONIALISMO Y EMIGRACIÓN. UNA VERDAD LATENTE BAJO EL NIVEL DE VELO

Resumen

El presente artículo reflexiona sobre la información latente en las imágenes coloniales y lo conecta con la teoría de la colonialidad del poder del sociólogo peruano Aníbal Quijano. Estas imágenes, reinterpretadas, constituyen una radiografía del pensamiento eurocéntrico. Así mismo establece un nexo entre el colonialismo y la emigración contemporánea. Para ello se analizan diversos ejemplos filmicos de reinterpretación de las imágenes coloniales, así como de la utilización del material de archivo para reflexionar sobre la emigración y la huella que esta dejó en el núcleo familiar. Entre los films analizados se encuentran *Moeder Dao, de schildpadgelykende* (Vincent Monnikendam, 1995), *Immagini dell'Oriente: turismo da vandali* (Yervant Gianikian, Angela Ricci Lucchi, 2001), *African Mirror* (Mischa Hedinger, 2019), *Leur Algérie* (Lina Soualen, 2020), *Radiograph of a Family* (Firouzeh Khosrovani, 2020) y *We Were So Beloved...* (Manfred Kirchheimer, 1986).

Palabras clave

Archivo; colonialismo; emigración; decolonialidad; cine documental.

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