

Third Projection: Collective Film Activation

The Archive of the National Film Institute of Guinea-Bissau and its Reactualization in the Mobile Cinema

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IN COLLABORATION WITH FILIPA CÉSAR AND AISSATU SEIDI

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Cinema is capable of activation. It can activate multiple subject positions, a vast array of points of view, and its general ability *to move* played a significant role for the close relation of cinema to social and political movements in the 20th century – even if the question of affect and feelings has been a contested terrain in cinematic (thought) production on the political.

Cinema is also always about a collective experience: it was (and is) in effect a *mass* medium; just as its production has always been a group effort, a work of collaboration, even if marked as *auteur* cinema. Cinematic experience is never just about the singular, the individual contemplation, even if cinema produces subjectivities.

Cinema – as a system, a dispositif, an economy, a history, a practice, and not reduced to the body of films and videos produced since its inception – can be understood as a practice which lingers at the intersection of perception and action.

This legacy also comes into play in and with video, especially in the reviewing practices of cinema's radical histories enabled by digital processes (digitization, production, distribution). In what follows I am describing one such instant where the digitization of an archive, which contains documents of a radical political moment of the past (the anticolonial liberation movement in Guinea-Bissau), turns it into a contemporary practice of activation.

Not simply the activation of material otherwise doomed to disintegrate and disappear, but the collective reviewing of this material which facilitates new forms of being together. Not by means of commemorating the past, but by turning the past into a tool to activate the present.

Visionary Archive: a collaborative translocal research project in five film archives (Cairo, Khartoum, Johannesburg, Bissau, and Berlin) on phases and facets of African Cinema with the term used as »an open bracket in which historical echoes come into their own, as do open questions.«¹ The project ended with a festival in Berlin in 2015. Within this festival, the curators of the project, Marie-Hélène Gutberlet and Tobias Hering, apply the concept of *reprendre*: the resumption, as a process of knowledge realignment with which the philosopher Yves Valentin Mudimbe describes contemporary African art production: »I mean it in the first sense of taking up an interrupted tradition, not out of desire for purity, which would testify only to the imaginations of dead ancestors, but in a way that reflects the conditions of today.« (1994: 154).

The artist Filipa César, born in Portugal but now living in Berlin, has been working on the history and the present of anti-colonial film in Guinea-Bissau since 2011. As part of her project »Animated Archive« and »Luta ca caba inda/The Struggle Is Not Over Yet«², she has digitized the remaining archival holdings of the National Film Institute of Guinea-Bissau (INCA: Instituto Nacional de Cinema e Audiovisual). These holdings consist of historical film material from the period of militant cinema and important documentary material from the period of the liberation struggle (1963-1974), although a large portion of the material was in fact destroyed during the civil war of 1998-99. With »From Boé to Berlin: A Mobile Lab on the Film History of Guinea-Bissau«³ the artist, along with filmmakers Suleimane Biai,

1 Project description (<http://www.arsenal-berlin.de/en/living-archive/projects/visionary-archive.html>, accessed November 1, 2015).

2 Project descriptions (<http://www.arsenal-berlin.de/en/living-archive/projects/living-archive-archive-work-as-a-contemporary-artistic-and-curatorial-practice/individual-projects/filipa-cesar.html>; <http://www.arsenal-berlin.de/en/living-archive/projects/animated-archive-2012.html>, accessed November 1, 2015).

3 In the context of Visionary Archive (<http://www.arsenal-berlin.de/en/living-archive/projects/visionary-archive/from-boe-to-berlin.html>, accessed November 1, 2015).

Flora Gomes, and Sana na N'Hada⁴ worked on making these archival holdings visible again. At the end of 2014 they took the newly digitized holdings on tour through Guinea-Bissau, with stations including Morés, Farim, Cacheu, Bafatá, Boé, and Buba. During this tour the journalist and radio worker Aissatu Seidi joined the project. She works for the association of community radios, and joined the team at the suggestion of Suleimane Biai.

The Mobile Cinema consists of public viewings: a mobile screen, a video projector, and if necessary a generator and loudspeakers. Depending on the location, César and N'Hada sometimes spontaneously select material during a viewing (the digitized material encompasses around 40 hours of film and 200 hours of audio tape), which then are viewed/heard by the people on site. Afterwards: Let's get talking. Questions, discussions, moderated by Aissatu Seidi, who invites, encourages, critically questions, intervenes, especially in matters of gender politics. Time and time again she asks for the women. Encouraging them to speak up. She also does this in her radio programs, above all on her weekly broadcast »Balur mindjer« [Women's Values].

The Mobile Cinema picks up on older traditions and at the same time works in the context of contemporary cinematic practice. For instance, mobile cinemas had already been introduced into certain colonized African countries, and were then taken up again in the post-colonial context, including in Guinea-Bissau, under new auspices.

4 N'Hada and Gomes are both important protagonists in the history of militant cinema in Guinea-Bissau, who became filmmakers during/through the liberation struggle. Gomes studied film in Cuba and in Senegal, his film »Mortu Nega« (1988) was Guinea-Bissau's first feature-length fiction film. N'Hada quit his medical studies and at the behest of Ámilcar Cabral traveled along with Gomes to Cuba, to study with Santiago Álvarez and to join the liberation movement with a camera instead of first aid kits. In 1979 N'Hada was appointed director of the INCA. Suleimane Biai belongs to a younger generation (*1968); he works as director, producer, and screenwriter. Since 2010 he has also served as *régulo* for the villages around his native town Farim. Like N'Hada and Gomes, Biai studied film directing at the Escuela Internacional de Cine y Televisión in Cuba. Alongside making his own films he has worked as an assistant to Flora Gomes and Sana na N'Hada. With César he co-authored the installation »Regulado« (2014), which was first presented at the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein (n.b.k).

Sana na N'Hada was himself involved in attempts to organize a mobile cinema at the end of the 1970s to show the films and newsreels being produced at the time. The project was based around the Cuban model of a 'Departamento de Divulgación Cinematográfica' and was supposed to overcome the rural population's enforced immobility due to agricultural work and make a contribution towards communication and the creation of knowledge within the heterogeneous state entity.⁵

Today, film screenings in Guinea-Bissau

mostly take place at private and semi-public locations and draw on the DVD market. Films thus reach their audiences via informal means. A traveling cinema equipped with mobile technology which goes directly to its audiences thus links both to the past practice of communicating culture via film as well as to the formats of shared film watching common today.⁶

The stations of the Mobile Cinema were collectively documented by Filipa César, Suleimane Biai, and Sana na N'Hada and eventually presented at Visionary Archive in May 2015 at the Kino Arsenal in Berlin.

This is where I get the chance to see this footage. Aissatu Seidis is impressive, both on screen as well as off. She is in Berlin for a few weeks, the three of us meet to talk: Filipa César, Aissatu Seidi, and myself. Filipa also translates, but of course informally, not simultaneously or consecutively. I transcribe the German parts later. The notes from this meeting form the basis of this text.

At the Mobile Cinema the material was shown as it was found. Not modified, not edited together, not checked, but open and un/finished. It is a matter of making images accessible, and not foreclosing them with interferences.

The need for discussion is great. The conversations always take more time than the actual film material, that is, several hours. It tends to be the younger people who want to speak. The older ones, according to Seidi, are often too wounded by the disappointments after the death of Amílcar Cabral in 1973 and the military coup in 1980. Reserve and mistrust prevails among

5 From the project description (<http://www.arsenal-berlin.de/en/living-archive/projects/visionary-archive/from-boe-to-berlin.html>, accessed November 1, 2015).

6 From the project description (<http://www.arsenal-berlin.de/en/living-archive/projects/visionary-archive/from-boe-to-berlin.html>, accessed November 1, 2015).

them. But the younger ones are fighting for their history: The memory of the anti-colonial liberation struggle is nominally managed by the still reigning PAIGC.⁷ Tacked on as an instrument in power politics, this history gets monumentalized on the one hand, but is withheld on the other.

The discussions open up ways to connect. The young people demand to know what they are surrounded by, but have no access to: Buildings and streets bear the names of presumably important persons. But no one knows that they are former freedom fighters, or even worse, they do not know anything at all about their stories. At the Mobile Cinema in Buba a girl asks Sana na N'Hada if he could help her with something. Her school is called Siaca Touré, but no one at the school knows where the name is from. N'Hada explains to her that he was an important figure in the liberation struggle, the nephew of Sékou Touré, the first president of the country. He then shows a segment of his film from 1976 »O Regresso de Amílcar Cabral«, in which Siaca Touré appears.

Knowledge about the liberation struggle is stored in private memory banks, private archives, and today's PAIGC no longer has any interest in collectivization: The movement has become nothing more than a political party. Power politics have dissolved the project of forming a counter-society. Not only did Amílcar Cabral understand »theory as a weapon« (»Theorie als Waffe«, Heimer 1981:72)⁸, he also developed and expanded alternative educational concepts aimed at specific groups. For instance, the Mobile Cinema also documents the practice of the »bush schools« (ibid: 74). Cabral's proposal for a decolonized society was left open in many essential points; the results were meant to be developed collectively. Political mobilization was understood as a social learning process.

Cabral's programmatic guidelines can almost entirely be traced back to the postulates of abolishing all oppression of people by other people, of trusting in one's own power and the development of social solutions. One important focus was his idea that every

7 The Partido Africano para a Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde (PAIGC) was founded by Cabral and others in 1956.

8 This and the following quotes translated by Daniel Hendrickson and Nanna Heidenreich.

solution had to be the result of a consistent participatory social learning process« (ibid: 73).⁹

The Mobile Cinema, according to César, is a research practice of the present. It activates the past in the present, says Seidi; the past makes it possible to critique the present. The Mobile Cinemas should also be seen as a gesture of giving, of giving back, and of giving way. Here Seidi introduces the image of the child who was gone and has now been given back to its mother for comparison. The people at the screenings have intense, but mixed feelings: great relief but also great rage – emotion and revolt, according to César. So the material from the film archive is lost property – which has now been given back. It makes it possible to speak in common in a country that has become increasingly ethnically divided since 1980. In Guinea-Bissau Portuguese is the official language of government, and thus also of schools and institutions of higher learning – but it is also a language spoken by only around 14 per cent of the population there. The lingua franca in Guinea-Bissau is Creole, and alongside that there are numerous regional languages. The Mobile Cinema takes place in Creole – but the word is: Anyone can and may speak, no matter the language, even if some of it has to be translated afterwards.¹⁰

9 The anti-colonial liberation movements were essentially also transnational solidarity movements – an indication of this can also be seen in N’Hadas and Gomes’s being educated in Cuba and Senegal. But such links can also be traced in light of educational politics. For instance, there was a close affinity to the liberation pedagogy of Paulo Freire in Brazil. He put the Institut d’Action Culturelle (IDAC), which he founded in Geneva in 1975, completely in the service of literacy and adult education in Guinea-Bissau, cf. Heimer (1981: 77).

10 Seidi has been continuing the project on the radio. She has already played several of the archival recordings on the radio—the flood of calls and reactions continued sometimes over weeks, especially after she broadcast Cabral’s »Speech about Women«, which he had held in 1975 in Conakry. In conversation with Seidi and César we also speak about Bertold Brecht’s »The Radio as an Apparatus of Communication« (1932) – not by chance, since Brecht’s poem »Questions from a Worker Who Reads« (1935) was used as a leitmotiv in César and Biai’s work together. The view of the victorious ruler displaces the view of those who pay the costs, of those who fought, cooked, built, cleaned, wept with him.

Histories get activated by mobile cinema, and not only in Guinea-Bissau. For instance, the project is reminiscent of the pedagogy of liberation that was developed in Guinea-Bissau in the spirit of Paulo Freire (and in collaboration with him), and of the central role that militant cinema played in the anti-colonial liberation movements. It is in fact not about any specific format or the contents on the screen, but about activating all participants in and through its circulation: showing and watching are what creates the actual political space of the cinema in the first place. In 1969 the Argentine filmmakers Fernando E. Solanas and Octavio Getino wrote their anti-colonial cinema manifesto: *Hacia un tercer cine*,¹¹ »Towards a Third Cinema«. The text was first published in the magazine *Tricontinental*, which had come out of the legendary anti-imperialist conference held in Havana in 1966.¹² In the manifesto they described how this cinema was meant to open up possibilities: »The attempt to overcome neocolonial oppression calls for the invention of forms of communication; it opens up the possibility.« (1969: 130) It opens up the possibility – emphasized in bold: not ›the possibility *to*‹, but possibilities that remain undefined, the nature of which is an open end – and in this text they describe political, radical, anti-colonial film as an equally open form. Alongside discussions about forms and format and about production methods, Solanas and Getino emphasize the question of distribution and reception: »forms of communication.« They radicalize cinema not only from the aspects of the camera, the screen, and the projection, but as activating showing and seeing: »We [...] discovered a new facet of cinema: the participation of people who, until then, were considered spectators.« (ibid) Viewing as action: »The spectator made way for the actor, who sought himself in others« (ibid).

Solanas and Getino discover three essential elements available to them (»we had at hand«, ibid) and with them Third Cinema becomes an activating cinema, an activist cinema: »The participant comrade«, »The free space«,

11 In the »Third Text« issue from 2011 on »Militant Cinema: A Ciné-Geography«, Ros Gray and Kodwo Eshun write that the text did not actually represent a manifesto, but rather a proposal of hypotheses. In their introduction they refer to Jonathan Buchsbaum's analysis of the reception and monumentalization of »Hacer un tercer cine« in the English-speaking realm, cf. Eshun/Gray (2011: 3).

12 Eshun/Gray comment in a footnote: »As Robert J C Young argues, this conference can be understood as the ›formal initiation of a space of international resistance of which the field of postcolonial theory would be a product« (2011: 1).

and »The film«, which, they add, only serves as a »detonator or pretext«, as a »pretext for dialogue« (ibid: 131). This displacement of an empowering recognition –

who sought himself in others« – identifying the events on screen with the space of the collective viewing – is supplemented, as Getino and Solanas describe their learning process, with additional moments that serve to collectivize what they now refer to as *film acts*: »As we gained in experience, we incorporated into the showing various elements (a stage production) to reinforce the themes of the films, the climate of the showing, the ›disinhibiting‹ of the participants, and the dialogue: recorded music or poems, sculpture and paintings, posters, a program director who chaired the debate and presented the film and the comrades who were speaking, a glass of wine, a few mates, etc. (ibid: 130)

No »showing«, but a »MEETING« (in the English version written in all capitals) (ibid: 131). The film is thus not the endpoint (no matter how it ›ends‹), but, in every case the result of showing and seeing, the beginning: »the film act means an open-ended film; it is essentially a way of learning.« The ›act‹ becomes activated.¹³

So far there have been eleven stations in the Mobile Cinema. According to Seidi, this is not enough. She has founded a group committed to working further with the material.¹⁴

13 Eshun/Gray use the term »ciné-geography« here:

»It refers not just to individual films but also to the new modes of production, exhibition, distribution, pedagogy and training made possible by forms of political organisation and affiliation. A critical component is the invention of discursive platforms such as gatherings, meetings, festivals, screenings, classes and groups founded by a range of students, activists, workers, film-makers, artists, critics, editors, teachers and many others at decisive moments in order to mobilise collective strategies.« (Eshun/Gray 2011: 1)

14 The material is stored at the Institut Français for safety reasons. Sana na N’Hada, as the former director of the archive, functions as the material’s guardian. Filipa César is also continuing to work on the material and with her project. She is currently completing a film on »Luta ca caba inda«.

»This is why the film stops here; it opens out so that you can continue it.«
(Solanas/Getino 1969: 131)

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