

Dark of the Sun (1968)

Ivo Ritzer

dir. Jack Cardiff; prod. George England; screenplay Randal MacDougall; photography Edward Scaifer; music Jacques Loussier. 35mm, color, 101 mins. MGM, distrib. MGM.

The colonial melodrama is one of the most multifaceted varieties of the melodrama genre. It is primarily related to adventure films and Westerns, which in their semantic polarization and syntactic affect-rhetoric—like Hollywood's genre cinema as such—can be understood as genuinely melodramatic forms of expression (Altman; Williams). In contrast to Westerns and adventure films, however, the colonial melodrama is not so much an allegorical narrative as it is a historical genre that infuses meaning into the geopolitical conflicts of the Global South from before, and especially during, decolonization and the struggle for independence (Bratton et al.). Here, the films visualize exotic fantasies in which white Europeans and North Americans act out their affective intensities in »foreign« locations. The characters do not openly represent colonialist interests, but they nevertheless appear with a paternalistic gesture that subordinates the alterity of the »foreign« to their own identities.

In the aftermath of worldwide decolonization processes beginning in the 1950s, the colonial melodrama has turned the spaces of the »Third World« into a new »frontier« and contact zone, where conflicts between »nature« and »culture« are enacted. After early paradigmatic examples such as Henry King's *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* (1952), John Ford's *Mogambo* (1953), and John Huston's *The Roots of Heaven* (1958), finally Jack Cardiff's *Dark of the Sun* (1968) became the genre's defining apotheosis. Based on Wilbur Smith's 1965 novel of the same title, the film relates the turmoil of a conflict in the Congo, where, after Belgian colonial powers withdraw, a group of international mercenaries encounter European settlers and African insurgents. Under the leadership of ex-British officer Curry (played by Rod Taylor), the mercenaries receive the order to save the diamonds stored in Fort Reprieve as well as saving the Europeans living there from marauding coup plotters. These plotters display extreme brutality, and the white settlers fear not only for the diamonds, but also for life and limb—and, as the story often goes, for the sexual integrity of their wives.



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

As a unique interpretation of the captivity narrative in Westerns and adventure films, where fantasies of »racial mixing« and the conquest of white women by the »wild« Other are acted out, *Dark of the Sun* rather shifts focus. A decolonial critique of capitalism and its greed figures prominently. While Curry and the former Wehrmacht soldier Henlein (played by Peter Carsten)—modeled after the historical figure Siegfried »Kongo-Müller«—do not feel obliged to the Congolese people, having their minds set on diamonds, Curry's best friend Ruffo (played by Jim Brown) is a Congolese man educated in the U.S. and now fighting for peace in his home country. Towards the end of the film, Ruffo is murdered by the greedy Henlein. The real villain, therefore, is among the mercenary unit itself. In the end, Henlein is lynched by Curry, who resigns his command and assigns a Congolese officer to complete his mission. Thus, the genre's semantics and ideology have come full circle as the former colonial powers withdraw from Africa. The colonizer must give up political and symbolic omnipotence, both of which are lost over the course of the narrative. This reminds us of Jean-Paul Sartre's famous preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, which diagnoses a comparable reversal of the prevailing conditions: »You can see it's the end; Europe is springing leaks everywhere. What then has happened? It simply is that in the past we made history and now it is being made of us. The ratio of forces has been inverted; decolonization has begun« (27). *Dark of the Sun* is about the twilight of colonialism, its proverbial death song.

Its meaning making and affective appeal are defined by hysterical contradictions. The term *hysteria* in this context refers to those repressed affects that reappear converted as histrionic symptoms. In the semantics of colonial melodrama, the Western and adventure film are overfulfilled. They no longer tell the tale of »the birth of a nation,« but of »the loss of a continent.« Africa is »lost« for the former colonizer, a loss now acted out in the colonial melodrama in a symptomatic and contradictory manner. Watching the characters of *Dark of the Sun* therefore means watching death at work. And yet, the film's heroes are the European mercenaries, who are characterized as fighters for the good. The mercenaries do not participate in any (post-)colonial genocide, but, on the contrary, try to prevent it. Herein lies the contraction of *Dark of the Sun*. On the one hand, the film rejects colonial violence. On the other hand, it legitimizes the mercenaries' violence as heroism. This contradiction originates in the motivation that brings the mercenaries to action in the first place. For *Dark of the Sun* by no means affirms the vision of a European sense of entitlement and superiority (the »white man's burden«). Instead, the film tells of the agony of the »old school« mercenary. *Dark of the Sun* thus creates a world that is determined by capitalist-imperial exploitation, a world that the mercenaries challenge. Cardiff's film characterizes them as living anachronisms: the last of a dying breed for which there is no longer any room in the opaque system of transnational economic entanglements. *Dark of the Sun* shows colonial history as a »male melodrama« (Mercer and Shingler 98) about aging individualists inevitably doomed for extinction in the face of the new globalized world order. Cardiff marks the protagonists' realization of their obsolescence as hysterical. The virile performance of heroic action could thus be read as a symptom of colonial loss. With the Hegelian stylization of the mercenary, an overcompensation of the threatened loss is performed; while at the same time it is pronounced even more clearly as an anachronistic remnant.

In contrast to the classic family melodrama, which temporarily externalizes internal psychological conflicts through expressive *mise-en-scène* (Elsaesser), the colonial melodrama, epitomized by *Dark of the Sun*, operates in a mode of permanent aesthetic

exaltation. Unusual and singular for its time is not only the drastic depiction of violence, including a notorious sequence in which Curry is attacked by Henlein with a chainsaw. Jack Cardiff—cameraman for Powell and Pressburger as well as for legendary color films such as *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946), *Black Narcissus* (1947), and *The Red Shoes* (1948)—renders *Dark of the Sun* psychedelic experimental cinema. He sets out to treat everything visible as artificial design. Instead of conjuring facts, he lets visions and ideas dominate. Instead of faithful reproduction, he chooses deformation. Through Cardiff's lens, the African bush appears emphatically artificial, presented in highly saturated green with bleeding bodies blazing in the brightest red. Everything and everyone in color: unreal, delirious, mythical, referencing the magic of life, of sensitivity, of passion.

The ideological semantics of the (post-)colonial fantasy should not, as always when it comes to cinema, be overestimated. Often cabals and conflicts seem to be but occasion for *emotion*; the omnipresence of violence but a source of *motion*. In *Dark of the Sun*, the scenes »we encounter, without any trace of representation (copying or imitating)« are all about »the dance of masks, the cries of bodies, and the gesturing of hands and fingers« (Foucault 348). Rather than putting the audience in a voyeuristic position *vis-à-vis* the narration, the colonial melodrama is in itself exhibitionist. It does not primarily aim to immerse its audience in the world projected by the film, but it first and foremost offers the potential to enjoy audiovisual attractions. Instead of narration, it is spectacle that dominates.

In its insistence on the exhibition of effects—but also through the use of stock characters, and with emphasis on action instead of empathic drama—the colonial melodrama reminds us of cinema's roots in circus, variety, and vaudeville as well as of early »ethnographic« films of an exotic quality, not to mention the notorious ethnological expositions in colonial culture.

The melodramatic effects of spectacle do not hold diegetic function in this context; rather, iridescent audiovisual stimuli subvert mechanisms of empathy and identification. Despite their narrative integration, the attractions remain aesthetic surplus, unproductive and irrational energy. The experience is not realized through decoding characters. The activation of imagination and memory seems to be suspended by the colonial melodrama through evasive affective expression and sensual, dreamlike perception. In other words, in *Dark of the Sun* the media form itself becomes hysterical. The aesthetic of attraction syntactically acted out leads less to a discourse of nostalgia than to the localization of the film in the present tense of its self-sufficient spectacle. This can hardly be absorbed, and thus an atopy of images and sounds emerges, exceeding causality, coherence, and continuity. From this perspective, cinema would be myth: »a genuine myth, that is, a lie which tells the truth« (Fiedler 399).

Instead of the discursive message of melodrama, it is its potential for affect that is of interest. Melodrama is, in fact, not a moral institution that emphasizes intensity over alienation. It instead raises questions of difference and repetition, of the subversion of knowledge: that is, meta-ideology and meta-politics. Melodrama is always the possibility of images conquering meaning, the physical conquering the psyche, the material conquering the idea. It is where the screen suddenly renders the invisible visible, where the semiotic merges into the poetic. Melodrama is where myth triumphs, where the unreal is nothing but reality. Melodrama is itself a black sun: a lie, twenty-four times a second, and therefore nothing but the pure truth.

Funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) under Germany's Excellence Strategy – EXC 2052/1 – 390713894.

References

- Altman, Rick. 1989. »Dickens, Griffith, and Film Theory Today.« *South Atlantic Quarterly*, no. 88, 321-59.
- Bratton, J. S., et al. 1991. *Acts of Supremacy: The British Empire and the Stage, 1790-1930*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Elsaesser, Thomas. 1972. »Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama.« *Monogram*, no. 4, 2-15.
- Fiedler, Leslie A. 1990. »Mythicizing the Unspeakable.« *Journal of American Folklore*, no. 103, 390-99.
- Foucault, Michel. 1998. »Theatrum Philosophicum.« In *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Vol. 2*, edited by James D. Faubion, 343-68. New York: New York Press.
- Mercer, John, and Martin Shingler. 2004. *Melodrama: Genre, Style, Sensibility*. London: Wallflower.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1963. Preface to *The Wretched of the Earth*, by Frantz Fanon, 7-31. Translated by Constance Farrington. New York: Grove Press.
- Williams, Linda. »Melodrama Revised.« In *Refiguring American Film Genres: Theory and History*, edited by Nick Browne, 42-88. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Wright, Will. 1975. *Six-Guns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western*. Berkeley: University of California Press.