

REGARDING MUSEUMS On Colonialities, Ownership and Loss

Short film program curated by Nnenna Onuoha
Sunday, September 12, 4pm – 9pm outside at Spreeufer
Spreeufer 6, 10178 Berlin



Filmstil from 'a so-called archive' 2020. UK. 20min. Dir. Onyeka Igwe

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Spanning a range of essay, experimental, fiction and documentary styles, the films in our program share a focus on interrogating the reality that so much of Africa's visual and material culture is in Western museums and archives. What does it mean, they ask, to have these sculptures, photographs, film reels, sound recordings, animals, people etc., from Africa, Asia and Oceania overwhelmingly on display in Euro-America? How were these acquired in the first place and how did colonialism play into that process? Taken together, these films explore what it might look like to decolonise memory cultures, either by calling for the return of objects, or in some cases, by attempting to recontextualise and reread them from the present. They are experiments on healing the epistemic violence inherent in colonial collecting practices.

Free entry, but tested, recovered, vaccinated!
Donations are welcomed. The Program is in English.

Please register via BARAZANI.berlin@gmail.com



4.15 – 5.15pm

PROGRAM 1: MUSEUM AS MAUSOLEUM TRT: 48min

Grappling with the idea of the museum as mausoleum, the films in this section ask what hope there is for restoring life to “dead” artefacts.

Les Statues Meurent Aussi

[ENG: Statues Also Die], 1953. France. 30min. Dir. Chris Marker, Alain Resnais and Ghislaine Cloquet. [French w/ English subtitles]

„When men die, they become history. Once statues die, they become art. This botany of death is what we call culture.“

Commissioned by the journal *Présence Africaine* and subsequently banned by French authorities for being anticolonial, this essay film explores the impact that colonialism in general and their acquisition by Western museums in particular has had on African art. Beginning with close-ups of some artefacts at the Musée de l’Homme set to the rhythm of drums, the film’s narrator subsequently criticizes how Western museums deprive African people of their culture and in turn separate these artefacts of their sacred and social contexts, transforming them instead into exotic and mass produced souvenirs.

Chris Marker was a French writer, photographer, documentary film director, multimedia artist and film essayist.

Alain Resnais was a French film director and screenwriter whose career extended over more than six decades.

Ghislain Cloquet was a Belgian-born French cinematographer.

Havemos de Voltar

ENG: We Will Return], 2017. Angola. 18min. Dir. Kiluanji Kia Henda
[Portuguese w/ English subtitles“

„The purpose of recording is also to certify the death of the event you intend to tell... The history presented here was sequestered by the fraudulent imagination of a foreign gaze.“

Amelia Capomba is a taxidermied-but-sentient giant sable antelope in the Archive Centre in Angola. Not content to remain as a lifeless historical relic, she resolves to return to what she considers her glorious past. However, the only forest she remembers is the artificial backdrop of the natural history museum. Taking its title from a poem by Angola’s first president Agostinho Neto, the film explores the difficulty of returning to a precolonial past when one has been so far removed from it.

Kiluanji Kia Henda is an Angolan-Portuguese multidisciplinary artist whose work explores themes of identity, politics, and perceptions of post-colonialism and modernism in Africa.

INTERMISSION

5.30 – 6.15pm

PROGRAM 2: SONIC SHADOWS, ARCHIVAL GHOSTS TRT 36min

Contextualising past collecting practices within the broader colonial project, the films in this section speculate about how the past continues to bleed into our present.

You Hide Me

1970. Ghana. 16min. Dir. Nii Kwate Owoo [English]

“We the people of Africa and of African descent demand that our works of art, which embodies our history, our civilization, our religion and culture, should immediately and unconditionally be returned to us.”

A man and woman enter the British Museum. Walking through its galleries and storerooms, they encounter sculpted African stools and masks, as well as intricately carved jewelry and decorative doors. As they examine the pieces, a narrator explains how the continued presence of African cultural objects in European and American museums fits into the colonial model of epistemicide. Initially taken to justify colonial perceptions of Africa at the bottom of civilisationist hierarchies, these objects are now kept, depriving Africans of their history and also to dictate to them, which aspects of their culture should be considered masterpieces. Nii Kwate Owoo is a Ghanaian academic and filmmaker, described by Variety as „one of the first Ghanaians to lense in 35mm“.

a so-called archive

2020. UK. 20min. Dir. Onyeka Igwe [English]

“I want to know what’s in that room he mentioned. I was looking online at the museum’s prospectus to see what they collect, and take a look at what’s officially in their holdings...”

An empty room. Dusty microphones. Cobwebs in a corner. Rusty celluloid cans. Traveling between the former Nigerian Film Unit in Lagos, and the former British Empire and Commonwealth Museum in Bristol, the images invite us to think about what may have been lost from the archives in either place, and what sonic shadows remain and speaks out to us, despite the material decay. A combination of radio recordings, audio tour guides and “overheard” conversations provoke complementary meditations on the relics of empire: what drove the acquisition of these photos, films, images in the colonial era? And what has led to their abandonment now?

Onyeka Igwe is an artist and researcher working between cinema and installation. She is born and based in London, UK.

INTERMISSION

6.30-7.30pm

PROGRAM 3: REINTERPRETING ARCHIVES TRT 34min

The films in this station revisit colonial photographic archives, asking whether and how these images can be given new, reparative or decolonial readings.

Faces | Voices

2019, UK, 18min, Dir. Christopher Thomas Allen and Paul Basu. (English)

“Curious. Desperate? Bewildered. A bit tearful. Wisdom. Questioning look. Angry. Proud. Desperate? Troubled. Focused. Trauma. Smiling. Optimistic person. Curious.”

Juxtaposing the black and white portrait photographs collected by colonial anthropologist N.W. Thomas in Nigeria and Sierra Leone between 1909 and 1915, with people in the present-day UK who are attempting to decipher them, the film is an experiment in re-reading the archive. Even though these images were created to be used in racist classificatory typologies, we observe how Black people today are able to also read not only the violence history behind them but also defiance, curiosity, and joy, on some of the photographed faces.

Paul Basu is a British social anthropologist and museum/heritage consultant who has worked and trained in film and TV production for several years.

Christopher Thomas Allen is a media artist from London and the founder and director of creative studio The Light Surgeons.

A New England Document

2020. USA. 16min. Dir. Che Applewhaite (English)

“We are one thing, this place and these people, says the photograph. Who would have thought that half a century later, an unnoticed whisper of the old way would turn up on the far side of the world?”

Centred around a collection of some 40,000 photographs taken by Harvard ethnographers Lorna and Laurence Marshall in the Kalahari Desert, Namibia, the film takes a reparative perspective on the images their four decades of expeditions, beginning in 1952, produced. Decades later, the anthropologists’ diary entries are read out by their daughter, Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, who had accompanied the research trip as a child. Interlaced with this, are the reflections of the filmmaker, himself a Black student at Harvard on racism, knowledge-production, and the role of the visual image.

Che Applewhaite is a Trinidadian-British writer, filmmaker. He approaches cultural work with internationalist and interdisciplinary commitments to politics of time, specificity, relation and cultural process.

INTERMISSION

7.45 – 8.45pm

PROGRAM 4: COLONIALITIES TRT 48min.

The films in this station extend their analyses of European memorial cultures connecting them to wider contexts of imperialism, racism, and global immigration policies.

They Live in Forests, They Are Extremely Shy

2016. United Kingdom. 4min. Dir. Saeed Taji Farouky. [English]

“You might recognise this. One of our more impressive displays from Arnam land. Take a closer look. I hear they can disappear, vanish at will.”

An indigenous Australian man who travels to London as a guest of honour at the 1886 Colonial Exposition is confronted by the presence of his kinsman’s corpse as one of its displays. Highlighting the devastating effect this has on him, and his attempts to treat the remains with proper care and respect, the film highlights the dehumanisation of colonial subjects by Western exhibition practice.

Saeed Taji Farouky is a Palestinian-British filmmaker and artist who produces work around themes of conflict, human rights and colonialism.

The Museum Will Not Be Decolonised

2018. UK. 10min. Dir. Arwa Aburawa and Sumaya Kassim [English]

“Although the connections between empire and Birmingham run deep this story is rarely represented within the museum, which aids so many convenient historical amnesias and propagates the myth of white innocence.”

Mixing archival images with narration, the film presents a history of the city of Birmingham particularly underlining its hidden connections to the colonial endeavour in the UK and apartheid policies in South Africa. Drawing upon critical race theory, it asks why, in a city and country that is so filled with monuments and museum spaces, these histories have been swept aside and not properly grappled with. Redefining decolonisation as remembering and acting with histories of violence in mind, it asks whether British institutions can really decolonise or whether they are simply bound to collect and co-opt the language of colonisation while continuing to glorify empire.

Arwa Aburawa is a journalist & documentary producer based in the UK with an interest in race, environmental issues and health.

Sumaya Kassim is a writer, curator and independent researcher based in Birmingham. She is interested in archives, memory, secularism and the politics of emotion.

Un-Documented: Unlearning Imperial Plunder

2019. UK. 34min. Ariella Aisha Azoulay [English]

“It is no secret that millions of people robbed of tools, masks and other objects that constituted their world, continue to seek a place where they can rebuild their homes. Not only do they have rights to these objects their rights are inscribed in them”

Divided into 3 parts: The Right to Live Nearby One’s Objects, Unconditional Disowning and the Gift, the film argues that we view asylum seekers’ attempts to migrate to former colonial metropolises, and the presence of plundered artefacts in European museums as twinned migrations and the products of similar processes of imperial exploitation and dispossession.

Ariella Aïsha Azoulay is an author, art curator, filmmaker, and theorist of photography and visual culture.



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curated by

Nnenna Onuoha

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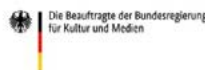


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