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Tracing Cinema as Anticolonial Resistance through the Archives of *Présence Africaine*

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This article considers the relationship between the journal Présence Africaine, and cinema as a vehicle for anticolonial thought and practice. Drawing upon archival research on the writings of Paulin Vieyra, the article explores the continued resonance of his work today, whilst also problematizing the historical silencing of Francophone African women filmmakers

From 26 March – 1st April 1959, the cultural and political journal *Présence Africaine* held the Second Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Rome, subsequently publishing a selection of Congress papers in the journal itself. Bringing together leading intellectuals including Aimé Cesaire and Franz Fanon, the second Congress sought to further establish the role of culture in the anticolonial struggle. Many leading African political figures, including Kwame Nkrumah and Patrice Lumumba, sent messages of support to the Congress ("Messages" 334-335), while Sekou Touré (104-115) and Léopold Sédar Senghor - who also attended the first Congress in Paris in 1956 - submitted papers for discussion (249-279). This convergence of politics and culture at the second Congress imagined decolonisation through and beyond state independence, articulating not only the political project of emancipation, but also more broadly its transformative social and cultural aspects.

In this vein, the Arts Commission at the Second Congress specifically debated the role of cinema as an instrument for decolonisation, issuing the following statement as part of their closing resolutions:

> The constructive use of cinema in the interest of African nationalism and legitimate cultural, social and spiritual objectives is an aim of great importance and must be given high priority in the efforts of Africans of Culture. In every modern nation, cinema serves not only entertainment and leisure purposes, but has become a strategic means of inculcating national aspirations and national character…cinema is both an art and an industry ("L'utilisation constructive du cinéma dans l'intérêt du nationalisme africain et des légitimes objectifs culturels, sociaux et spirituels est un but de grande importance et doit bénéficier d'une haute priorité dans les efforts des Africains de culture. Dans toute

> nation moderne, le cinéma sert non seulement à des usages de divertissement et de loisir, mais il est devenu un dispositif stratégique destiné à inculquer les aspirations nationales et le caractère national…Le cinéma est à la fois un art et une industrie" ; *my translation,* "Résolution de la Commission des Arts" 415-416).

As independence movements gained momentum across Africa, attendees at the second Congress recognised the "strategic" possibility of cinema as a medium, highlighting both its aesthetic and political possibility to "inculcat[e] national aspirations and…character". Given the international nature of the Congress, this article considers this conception of cinema against a history of transnational anticolonial networks of solidarity, also embodied by *Présence Africaine* more broadly as a public forum through which the anticolonial possibility of cinema could be discussed and disseminated to a broad, international audience. It argues that a re-examination of the relationship between cinema practice and *Présence Africaine* opens up new avenues for thinking about the broader cultural politics of decolonisation both historically and today.

To illuminate this relationship, I have surveyed all digitized editions of *Présence Africaine* from 1947-2014, noting repeat contributors and paying particular attention to writing on cinema. I also noted reports of conferences and events pertaining more broadly to the arts and culture, particularly where these discussions encompassed thinking on cinema theory and practice. The writings of the filmmaker Paulin Vieyra (later Minister for Information in Senegal, 1960-1975) are quoted extensively throughout the article, as while there are many notable contributions regarding cinema printed in *Présence Africaine*, Vieyra's writing covers the widest period (1957-1987) and makes up the majority of the cinema contributions printed in the journal.

I begin by investigating the role played by *Présence Africaine* in establishing a dialogic sphere through which African cinema theory and practice could be developed. Drawing particularly on the writings of Vieyra, I consider the role of the African cinema industry in the broader anticolonial project. By focussing on the ways in which cinema as an anticolonial medium continued to be developed and discussed in *Présence Africaine* post-1960, this article considers the continuing resonance of this thinking today. However, by problematizing the silencing of women filmmakers from within both the history of African cinema and the archives themselves, I also seek to argue that our understanding of the anticolonial possibility of cinema is necessarily flawed unless we investigate these marginalised voices. Drawing

particular attention to the work of the filmmakers Safi Faye, Sarah Maldoror and Thérèse Sita-Belle, I argue that it is only by listening to the silences in the archive that we can grapple with the full complexity of the decolonial moment, resurrecting marginalised stories that are key to our continued understanding of decolonisation.

Présence Africaine as a Platform for Anticolonial Cinema Theory and Practice

Présence Africaine was, from its very inception, a collaborative endeavour, bringing together a diverse group of intellectuals from across the political spectrum. Indeed, the journal's commitment to solidarity and collaboration was reflected in its first editorial, published in both French and English. The English translation printed in the journal asserts "this review is not under the bidding of any philosophical or political ideology. It is open to the collaboration of all men of goodwill (white, yellow and black), who are willing to help us define the African's creativity and to hasten his integration in the modern world" (Diop et al. 185). While the more paternalistic elements of this first editorial are problematic (particularly in its conception of Africa's relation to the "modern world", the use of "yellow" as shorthand for racial categorisation, and the omission of any mention of women), the journal's broader commitment to decolonisation, and attempts to facilitate transnational conversations which advanced anticolonial resistance, should be acknowledged. From the outset, *Présence Africaine* sought to establish networks of solidarity that linked thinkers and intellectuals of the diaspora with those living in Africa itself. As Bennetta Jules-Rosette points out, the "first copy of *Présence Africaine*…was distributed simultaneously in Paris and Dakar, Senegal" (6), signalling the journal's ambitions towards generating international conversations, which included a plurality of voices.

Within debates regarding the place of cinema in anticolonial struggles, this networked reach of *Présence Africaine* is important as the journal also significantly supported filmmaking from its inauguration, notably commissioning the subsequently censored French short film *Les Statues Meurent Aussi* by Alain Resnais and Chris Marker in 1953.[1] Largely through the writings of Paulin Vieyra, *Présence Africaine* espoused a politics of cinema that emphasised the importance of the medium within the process of decolonisation. In a comprehensive article published in 1958 and entitled "Propos sur le Cinéma Africain", Vieyra outlined his vision for the development of African cinema, arguing for the establishment of an International Cinema Centre in Dakar (106-117). Vieyra argued that this Centre should provide training for young African filmmakers which would involve sending students abroad to take up "advanced

training, or even a complete cycle of film education" ("un stage de perfectionnement, voir pour un cycle complet d'enseignement cinématographique"; *my translation,* 115). These internships would ultimately cease once a large body of African filmmakers had graduated and could therefore impart their knowledge to the next generation of cinéphiles. Vieyra further argued that the state should organise public cinema screenings, with cinema exhibition incorporated into the public sector. In acquiring technical equipment to be used by filmmakers within Africa, Vieyra also proposed that an International Cinema Centre could encourage all African filmmakers to shoot films for training, education, and entertainment purposes. In later articles in *Présence Africaine*, Vieyra would argue that these films should, above all, be "functional" ("fonctionnel"; *my translation,* 313) and in line with the politics of decolonisation. Vieyra's vision for African cinema is that of a co-ordinated industry, as he urges the synchronised development of cinema production, technical expertise, and film exhibition. Thus, while later articles published by Vieyra in *Présence Africaine* make clear film content's capacity to reflect anticolonial politics, his article here posits that cinema as an industry can also embody the successes of decolonisation by establishing its technical and economic independence from former colonial nations. The vision for cinema here is as a vehicle for economic liberation from the former colonial powers, crucially tied to the very essence of nation building in independent African states. Framed by the collaborative ethos of *Présence Africaine*, Vieyra's assertion that young African filmmakers should continue to hone their skills abroad is significant in this context. It suggests a broader mobilisation of transnational anticolonial networks of solidarity that facilitated an international sharing of skills in aid of the decolonial project, linking the diaspora, former colonial states, and newly independent nations in redefined ways.

The influence of the networks surrounding *Présence Africaine* in developing African cinema can also be seen if we return to the discussions held at the Second Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Rome in 1959. With the Arts Commission echoing Vieyra's call for the establishment of cinema centres across Africa, it is clear that *Présence Africaine* provided Vieyra and his supporters with a platform through which they attempted to shape debates surrounding cinema's role in decolonisation ("Résolution de la Commission des Arts" 418). In this light, it is also significant that Vieyra was named by Léopold Sédar Senghor as Minister for Information and Head of the Bureau du Cinema in post-independence Senegal, given that both men were intimately involved with *Présence Africaine* and were integral members of the journal's broader network. Resurrecting these interlocking relationships and networks is not only important in relation to historical accuracy, but it also allows us to gain a greater

understanding of what Dipesh Chakrabarty terms "the dialogical side of decolonisation" (4812). Investigating the conversations regarding African cinema that circulated through the networks associated with *Présence Africaine*, we encounter transnational connections that embody a wider politics of anticolonial solidarity, weaving the history of African cinema practice into its broader social, cultural and political context.

Writing on Cinema: The Aftermath of Independence

As African nations gained independence from the former colonial powers, *Présence Africaine* published a series of editorials and special issues celebrating the newly independent states. These included special issues dedicated to the independence of Guinea in 1959-1960 ("Guinee Independante!") and Somalia in 1961 ("[Introduction]" 73-74), with editorials celebrating the independence of Nigeria in 1960 ("Faisons Confiance à l'Afrique" 4-7) and Algeria in 1962 ("Salut à l'Algérie Indépendante" 3-4). However, these publications were also tempered with expressions of worry. In the editorial marking the independence of Nigeria for example, the growing violence in the Congo is also highlighted, as well as the increasing tensions between newly independent Sudan, Senegal, and Mali. A later editorial published in 1962 also warns of the dangers of neo-colonialism ("A Propos du Néo-colonialisme" 3-4). The tone of the articles that appear in *Présence Africaine* during this period is particularly interesting, as while there is jubilation at the gaining of independence, the enormity of the task at hand is frequently underlined as contributors draw attention to the continuing obstacles to anticolonial politics across the continent.

It is compelling to consider the writing on cinema presented in *Présence Africaine* during the early nineteen-sixties as a particular instance of this disquiet over developments in the aftermath of independence. A 1964 article written by the filmmaker Timité Bassori considers, for example, the challenges facing the development of African cinema, focussing specifically on production and exhibition. Lamenting a lack of government investment in the cinema industry, he ends his article with the bleak conclusion that "we can only wonder if Black African cinema will not be a stillborn" ("nous ne pouvons que nous demander si le cinema négro-africain ne sera pas un mort-né"; *my translation*, 115). If we place Bassori's writing against Vieyra's "Propos sur le cinema Africain" (1958), it acts as a reassertion of Vieyra's call for investment in African cinema as an industry. However, while Vieyra's article projects a vision of African cinema as a vehicle for economic and social emancipation, Bassori instead sounds the alarm that a lack of political will and investment within the African cinema

industry risks limiting the emancipatory potential of the medium in the present. Post-independence, Bassori makes a concerted attempt to recall the political and cultural vision of decolonisation, as articulated by individuals and thinkers during the independence struggles.

In this vein, it is also worth noting that in 2004 *Présence Africaine* ran a special issue dedicated to African cinema, including an extensive homage to Vieyra and reprinting several of his articles. These were included alongside several contributions that considered the development of African cinema since 1955, as well as the challenges it continued to face. In the special issue's opening article, Romuald Fonkoua appraised the "realism, militancy and engagement" ("Réalisme, militanisme et engagement"; *my translation*, 5) of African cinema, as well as the "path followed by African cinema from the point of view of technical mastery" ("le chemin parcouru par le cinéma africain du point de vue de la maîtrise de la technique"; *my translation*, 6). But he again highlighted the "problem of distribution" ("le problème de la distribution"; *my translation,* 6), echoing industrial issues identified by Bassori many years earlier. Thus, while the hopes that Vieyra and his peers held for African cinema had indeed come to fruition by 2004, many of the challenges they articulated also remained in place. This is most noticeable regarding questions of exhibition and distribution, where Vieyra's vision for the cinema industry as a vehicle for anticolonial economics continues to encounter obstacles even today. That his writings continue to be reproduced and drawn upon more recently is therefore of little surprise.

In Search of Women Filmmakers: A Silenced Legacy

The legacy of *Présence Africaine* in contemporary film culture also relates to the presence (or non-presence) of women filmmakers in histories of the journal. In her examination of the role played by women in *Présence Africaine* and their contribution to the first Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Paris (1956), Merve Fejzula notes that "the full history of women's involvement in the activities of P*résence Africaine* is yet a story haltingly told, but it serves as a reminder of the critical work necessary in telling the history of Pan-Africanism and women" (Fejzula). In relation to writing on cinema in the journal, women filmmakers are often relegated to the margins and footnotes. Yet their absent presence attests to alternative histories of resistance and anticolonial cinema practice that are important to acknowledge and investigate as we consider both the historical moment of decolonisation and its continued resonance. A consideration of the place of women filmmakers within writing on cinema in the journal yields

an important gendered perspective on the historical aftermath of independence in its intersection with African cinema and anticolonialism more broadly.

In a tribute to Paulin Vieyra written by Sarah Maldoror and published in *Présence Africaine* in 2004, there is an asterisk next to Maldoror's name. This asterisk points to a footnote explaining to the reader that she is a "Guadeloupean filmmaker" ("cinéaste guadeloupéenne"; *my translation,* 23) and details the names of some of her films. Published alongside Maldoror's article is another tribute to Vieyra, written by the director Ousmane Sembène (21-22). There is notably no asterisk next to his name. That Maldoror needs introducing to the reader, unlike Sembène, is not surprising if one considers the fact that her work has suffered from a particular form of historical silencing. According to Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of *sources*); the moment of fact assembly (the making of *archives*); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of *narrative*); and the moment of retrospective significance" (26). Victim to this "particular bundle of silences" (Trouillot 27), the historical significance of Sarah Maldoror and her work is often overlooked. Unpacking these silences at the level of "fact assembly", it is notable that in the *Présence Africaine* archives the only mention of Maldoror's work is in two articles by Vieyra, who mentions screenings of her film *Sambizanga* (1972) at two film festivals in 1973 ("Journées Cinématographiques de Carthage" 178-187; "Festival Cinématographique Panafricain de Ouagadougou" 218-227). That her work is only mentioned as an adjunct to the broader festivals is significant, for while Vieyra expresses his admiration for her film, his articles do little to highlight her wider oeuvre. At the level of "fact creation", this silencing is further enhanced when one considers the fact that her film *Les Fusils Pour Bantu* (1970) about female anticolonial resistance in Guinea has been lost. Financed by the Algerian Revolutionary Government, the film was seized post-production by Government officials who deemed the content "too ambiguous" (González). As a result, only a small selection of still photographs and Maldoror's own accounts of the film attest to its existence in the archives. With the asterisk against Maldoror's name in her tribute to Vieyra, silences at the level of "fact retrieval" are also apparent in the description of Maldoror as simply a filmmaker from Guadeloupe. While Maldoror 's parents were from Guadeloupe, she was born in France and later "joined the struggle of African emancipation movements" (González), generating an impressive corpus of anticolonial films shot across Africa. To present her as simply a filmmaker from Guadeloupe ignores the diverse nature of her own biography. Moreover, while Maldoror did not exclusively

work on cinema in French West Africa, her strong anticolonial stance coupled with her ties to the French metropole connect her to a broader network of West African female filmmakers and suggest an understanding of her work that would shed light on the broader role of female filmmakers in anticolonial histories in the region.

As I sought traces of Maldoror in the *Présence Africaine* archives, I stumbled repeatedly across the spectres of other women whose absent presence attested to the unresolved gendered social violence that sought to write these pioneers out of histories of anticolonial filmmaking. Safi Faye - widely credited as the first West African female feature filmmaker - is mentioned, for example, only once in the *Présence Africaine* archive, again by Vieyra who cites her as a jury member of the 25th Francophone Film Festival in Cabourg ("Le 25e Festival international" 166-172). There is conversely no mention in the journal of the first female organisers of the Pan-African Film Festival, FESPACO, Alimbata Salimbéré and Simone Mensah, despite Vieyra's repeated coverage of the festival held in Burkina Faso.[2] Significantly, I was unable to trace any copies of Safi Faye's films either online or on DVD. In addition, when looking for copies of the short film *Tam-Tam à Paris*, directed by Thérèse Sita-Belle, and screened at the first edition of FESPACO in 1969 (Dupré 96), I discovered that "it is today almost impossible to find a copy" (Murphy 61). The difficulty in accessing these resources is revealing. These archival silences erase female narratives of resistance, obscuring our accounts of cultural history as the history of African cinema is presented to us through a masculine gaze. Sarah Maldoror's feature film *Sambizanga* (1972) is an interesting case study in what is lost here. Detailing the disappearance of Angolan revolutionary, Domingos Xavier, *Sambizanga* follows the story of his wife, Maria, as she searches for her husband in the jails of Luanda, Angola. Centring histories of female anticolonial resistance, the film highlights the role of women in networks of anticolonial solidarity. Attesting to the gender diversity of these networks - a perspective often left out of official accounts - the film demonstrates the potential for female filmmakers to redress exclusionary historical silences. If we do not seek these alternative voices within the history of independence struggles, we reproduce the gendered silences that are written into existing narratives of these historical moments. Our ability to learn from them and to continue the decolonial project today is therefore made significantly more difficult.

Conclusion

In his book, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Michel-Rolph Trouillot

argues that "History is messy for those who live it" (110). Looking through the archives of *Présence Africaine*, I continually returned to this phrase, as I searched for traces of anticolonial cinema theory and practice. In focusing on the writings of Paulin Vieyra, this article has suggested that Vieyra and his supporters envisaged a West African cinema industry that embodied the ideas of decolonisation, sharing this vision with others through networks and conferences organised by *Présence Africaine*. However, these networks traversed the globe in "messy" ways. That is to say, while they enabled international conversations and practice sharing, they were rarely confined to simply one geographical area or political sphere. Moreover, many of the female filmmakers who were members of these networks remain problematically obscured from official accounts. This leaves our understanding of cinema making and anticolonial resistance incomplete, compelling us to pay greater attention to gendered archival silences as we attempt to reconstruct histories of anticolonial networks of resistance. While the vision that Vieyra and his peers articulated for the development of an African cinema industry was largely conceived of as linear, history and development rarely work so neatly. Thus, while some of Vieyra's earlier aims for African cinema have been achieved, others remain prescient today, with issues of *Présence Africaine* published as recently as 2004 continuing to consider notable problems in the field of film exhibition and distribution.

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[1] For a good introduction to the debates concerning the place of cinema in anticolonial struggles, as well as the decolonial possibility of African cinema see Givanni, June, and Imruh Bakari. *Symbolic Narratives/African Cinema: Audiences, Theory and the Moving Image*. BFI Publishing, 2000.

[2] For further discussions of Alimbata Salimbéré and Simone Mensah, see Beti Ellerson and Falila Gbadamassi, "African Women on the Film Festival Landscape: Organizing, Showcasing, Promoting, Networking", *Black Camera*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2019, pp. 424-456 (p. 425-426).

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