

FROM *BANANIA* TO *CHOCOLAT*: THE FRENCH COLONIZATION OF AFRICA AND CONTEMPORARY CINEMA

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Perhaps the greatest mistake I made when I began my graduate studies was the naive, yet conscious decision to be a “voyageur sans bagage”; that is, I decided that I was going to approach the study of literature—French literature—as if I had an “innocent eye,” to borrow a term from Roger Shattuck. I was going to study each text as a truly autonomous aesthetic experience that would eventually reveal something universal about language and literature. I practiced full-tilt structuralist poetics; Roland Barthes’ *Le Plaisir du texte* was my Bible. This is perhaps the most nefarious legacy of my very stilted understanding of a movement that, above all, simply encouraged us to look at texts, all texts, not so much with an innocent as with a DIFFERENT eye.

What I have found most appealing about post-structuralist theory, feminist, cultural and postcolonial in particular, is the emphasis that is placed on the baggage that comes along with every social, political, historical and aesthetic experience. The colonizers of Africa came to the continent from a Europe whose attics were crammed with chests filled with three millennia of culture. They walked off the gangplank in far-off places with sonorous names such as Dakar, Alger, Abidjan and Lambaréné; their porters burdened with *mission civilisatrice*-laden steamer trunks. And the people who make movies about all of this have baggage of their own, as do the people who talk and write about them; not unlike the ones who read those who write about others who make films about those who don’t. This is the house that the West built.

In the first installment of this two-part study, the second half of which will appear at a later date, I present the theoretical framework within which I will examine the French colonial experience as portrayed in contemporary cinema.

For me, deconstruction, particularly—but not always—as practiced by Derrida, is a customs officer who, more or less politely, asks us to open our luggage. I am about to subject several films that deal with the French colonial presence in Africa to a customs—like shakedown—and I hope that you will do the same to this paper. When I arrive at Paris' Charles de Gaulle airport, I usually choose the “nothing to declare” exit, but in the spirit of—illusory—fair play, I would like to partially open my own baggage. Among other things, it contains the following:

(1) I was born in the city of Rochefort on the Atlantic coast of France, hometown of writer and naval officer Pierre Loti, the most renowned of all French exoticists.

(2) Five months after my birth, another Rochefort native and naval officer, my father, was killed at the battle of Dien Bien Phu.

(3) My favorite breakfast drink when I was a child was *Banania*, a chocolate and banana flavored concoction that is still popular in France today.

(4) The first movie that I can recall seeing was a dubbed-in-French version of a Tarzan film.

(5) The earliest texts that I can remember reading were *Tintin in the Congo* and *Kit Carson*, a French-produced series of comic books on the adventures of the legendary American scout.

(6) The most memorable image of my grammar school experience was found on the very first page of my history book: the Gaul chieftain Vercingétorix haughtily throwing down his weapons at the feet of Julius Caesar, thereby reifying a defiant attitude that, once transformed into an educational praxis, would eventually echo through the halls of every school in the Empire: “Nos ancêtres les Gaulois.” (Our ancestors, the Gauls).

(7) My first awareness of political turmoil came in the late fifties in the form of three short blasts followed by two longer ones emanating from the car horns of my countrymen: Al-gé-rie fran-çaise (Keep Algeria French!).

The apparently flippant juxtaposition of a breakfast drink with the death of my father should not be interpreted as ironic. The tragedy of French intransigence in Indochina and the personal loss that resulted from it, although they have had a great impact on me as an adult, were not the formative experiences of my childhood; by the time I could attempt to come to terms with them, they were nothing more

than abstractions: the absence of a presence I had never known. Present on my breakfast table for the first eight years of my life, however, was the smiling face of the Senegalese infantryman who adorned the boxes of *Banania*. Condescendingly nicknamed *Y'a bon* for the way in which he expressed his enthusiasm for the product (the French idea of how an African says "C'est bon!"), this French Aunt Jemima helped shape my conception of the world beyond the borders of France. *Y'a bon*, whose face was more familiar to me than that of my father, provided the physiognomy, while the adventures of Tintin circumscribed the geography. My first impressions of the "other," that is the non French, came in part from the products of the racialist discourse that justified the colonial enterprise.

The Senegalese infantryman on the *Banania* box is, as we shall see, a historical reality; African troops served in the French Colonial Army and saw action in all military engagements from the First World War through the Algerian Revolution. Thus, it comes as no surprise that he is present in both the films that I wish to discuss: *La Victoire en chantant* (better known as *Black and White in Color*) and *Chocolat*. But it is, paradoxically, as an icon of colonialism that he is seen in the films and it is as such that I wish to refer to him. I will from this point on use the term *Banania* as a rhetorical device that signifies a specific way of observing, portraying and interpreting the French colonial experience; I shall do the same with the word *Chocolat*. One can easily establish a hierarchy of *Banania*-ism, but it has as its guiding principle a Eurocentric vision that, although it may at times condemn the euphemistically charged excesses of imperialism, never fully rejects its premise: the primacy of the West. It manifests itself in such statements as "America is number one!" and "We built roads and hospitals and taught them to read and write; and they wanted their independence, but what have they done with it? Just take a look at what is happening in Africa today!"; and "Show me the African Beethoven."

In the literature of the nineteenth century and in the texts and films of the first half of this century, the *Banania* mentality of the West develops the dialectic of the good and the bad African. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o points out in his book *Decolonising the Mind*:

The reader's sympathies are guided in such a way as to make him identify with Africans collaborating with colonialism and to make him distance himself from those offering political and military resistance to colonialism. One can see the same schema at work today in the portrayal of the various African regimes in the Western media. (92)

Banania, seen in this light is a politics and an aesthetic of acceptance: a submission to the status quo; the reassuring smile of *Y'a*

bon, for “after all, he’s just one of us, just a bit more exotic.” Contrapuntally, I would like to use the term *Chocolat* to denote the aesthetic and the politics of resistance. My choice of this word is obviously attributable to what I see as the essential discourse of the film that bears the same name, but it is also grounded in semantics. In modern colloquial French, *Chocolat* evokes a situation in which one has been frustrated, thwarted, foiled, deprived. “*Je suis chocolat*” (or: “*J’ai fait chocolat*”) can be translated as “I got gypped” or “ripped off.” The corollary expression, *rester chocolat* (or *demeurer chocolat*) signifies “to be left stranded,” “in the lurch.” *Chocolat* becomes the confrontation of two consciences: that of the colonized who rejects the exploitation to which he has been submitted and proclaims his independence, and that of the colonizer who faces the consequences of imperialism and realizes that the gig is up. *Chocolat* is a paradigm of inclusiveness that in effect rejects European ethnocentrism and implies that the result of this ideology has indeed left everyone stranded.

What interests me here is the degree to which *Banania* and *Chocolat* can be applied to the colonial discourse as it manifests itself in the films *Black and White in Color* and *Chocolat*. I would like to say that I consider these films to be ultimately satisfying aesthetic experiences. I am not alone in this judgement, as both enjoyed considerable critical and popular support in France and in the United States—*Black and White in Color* even won an Oscar as best foreign-language film in 1976. The more recent triumphs of *Indochine* and *The Lover* seem to indicate an American fondness for cinema dealing with the French colonial experience, or, more likely, with the exoticism that comes with the package. I should also add in passing that, unfortunately, I have no idea of how these films were received in Africa. I could speculate that, as they can easily be perceived as being products of an Africanist discourse, that is of “the systematic language for dealing with and studying Africa FOR the West” (Said 193), these films may not have engendered the same degree of enthusiasm among the Africans who have seen them.

At the risk of setting off a polemic about the “meaning” of a work of art, I believe that it is not unreasonable to affirm that both of the films in question deal with the problematics of colonialism. I’ll go so far as to claim that they are ostensibly anticolonial statements. If one accepts the premise, it seems not only logical but imperative to study the degree of efficiency with which they have accomplished their mission.

I chose these two films because they have many points in common while sustaining diametrically opposed visions. Both films were

filmed exclusively in Africa. Set in pre-independence twentieth-century Cameroon (1915-1918 in the case of *Black and White in Color*, and the mid-fifties in *Chocolat*), each tells a story that implicitly or explicitly denounces the horrors of the conquest and exploitation to which the Africans were subjected by the Europeans. They show not only how the colonizers subjugate by means of military and economic force, but also how they assure the permanence of the enterprise by a campaign of systematic deculturation. The Africans are dispossessed of their land, their time, their language, their religious beliefs, their body, their very identity as evidenced by the fact that all characters, save one, in both films have been “rebaptized” with irony-laden French names such as Fidèle, Prospère, Lamartine, Robespierre, Dieudonné and, in the case of an “English” servant, Yorick. The scenes where African men are used as so much cannon fodder in the settling of petty European accounts; those where women are exploited as objects for the sublimation of repressed desire or simply as an antidote for boredom; those where the missionaries are “making Christians,” as the sergeant in *Black and White in Color* puts it; teaching French military jargon, burning African art work, and demonstrating the superiority of a white man’s God who can give “even” the black man the ability to ride a bicycle; the scenes in *Chocolat* where the ingeniously named Protée (Proteus), the outwardly subservient “boy” of the district commander, is subjected to the whims, verbal abuse, lascivious gazes and outright sexual advances of his employers; all of these illustrate the politics of dispossession of which Frantz Fanon writes in *Toward the African Revolution*: “The enterprise of deculturation turns out to be the negative of a more gigantic work of economic, and even biological, enslavement” (3). On this level, both films do an admirable job of showing the colonization of Africa for what it was: an enslavement that contradicted the very democratic ideals professed by the West, as embodied in the Third Republic. *Black and White in Color* and *Chocolat* are examples of a postcolonial cinema that deals with the colonial—and even neocolonial—era by rejecting the unapologetic, empire-building racism of films based on the novels of Loti, Kipling and Rider Haggard; the Tarzan and Beau Geste adventures of my childhood. They are fully inscribed in a recent tradition of fictional cinema that finds its first and perhaps finest European expression in the documentary-like realism of Gillo Pontecorvo’s *Battle of Algiers*. Although they are essentially—but not exclusively—products of an Africanist discourse, these films can hardly be attacked for sustaining the racist dialectic of the good versus the bad African that constitutes the most repugnant level of what I have chosen to represent by the word Banania.

The issue becomes more problematic when we consider the possibility that these films could subvert the force of their anti-colonial message by using a rhetoric that flows from more insidious forms of the imperialist mentality. To what extent can these films be seen as exotic travelogues, Banania-tourism, as exemplified by the following advertisement for Kenyan safaris that I found in a 1975 edition of *The New Yorker*? “The proud Massai. Dyed-to-match bodies covered with ochre clay. Great for snapshots because they’re handsome—but so is their fee for posing” (175). As Tzvetan Todorov has written, a tourist is a hurried visitor who prefers monuments to human beings as the former never question our identity: “That is why he prefers images to language; the camera is an emblematic instrument that will allow him to objectify and eternalize his collection of monuments” (378). Are there any moments when Claire Denis and Jean-Jacques Annaud unwittingly obfuscate their message beneath a veil of 19th century exotic titillation to which we are all more or less receptive?

But tourism, not unlike imperialism is essentially a question of geography. What happens when we move to the next level? To the desire to tear off the veil—the literal one—by means of the study of the geography with a human face that is better known as cultural anthropology? As Madan Sarup points out in a recent book on Post-Structuralism, this very concern constitutes the essence of Derrida’s deconstruction of Lévi Strauss:

He appears sentimental and nostalgic, trapped in a Rousseauistic dream of innocent and natural primitive societies. Beneath the guilt and nostalgia, endemic to the field of anthropology, lies a Western ethnocentrism masking itself as liberal and humane anti-ethnocentrism. (40)

This is an example of what I have taken to calling the “feathers in his hair and feathers in his head” syndrome ever since I read Pauline Kael’s scathing criticism of what she perceived as the misguided, condescending and, above all, fundamentally dishonest egoism of Kevin Costner’s position in the film *Dances with Wolves* (115). This is not a condemnation of anthropology, but rather a warning, such as Frantz Fanon’s in *Black Skin, White Masks* (85), against certain intellectual practices, grounded in empathy for the subject, that can nevertheless lead to the sort of apologetic reductionism found in Dominique O. Mannoni’s explanation, in *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization*, of an African inferiority complex that antedates colonialism. Once again, are there gaps in Denis’ and Annaud’s logic? Can they ever be accused of condescension? of fostering Banania pity, superficial remorse, simplistic nostalgia or amusement/bemusement based on ironic detachment?

This leads us to the fundamental problem; that of cinematographic discourse and the poetics that subsumes Annaud's and Denis' assault on French colonialism in Africa. My contention is that, to a great extent, the measure of their effectiveness can be linked to the degree with which irony is employed as a critical device for deconstructing the conceptual fallacies of imperialism. By degree, I mean more the consistency than the actual frequency with which irony is used. I believe that in these two films, irony, its presence, its absence and the consequential manner in which it is or is not used, constitute a catalyst by means of which we can more easily synthesize the *Banania-Chocolat* dialectic as it applies to *Black and white in Color* and *Chocolat*. As critics and writers from Rabelais to Barthes have often shown—wittingly or not—irony is a distancing figure that, since it identifies itself by what it isn't rather than by what it is, can never fully render its subject. As such, irony is a subtext of the problematics of aesthetic distance. This is portentous when one realizes that it also happens to be the structuring principle of satire as practiced by the likes of Montesquieu and Voltaire, and that satire is often the first bomb thrown against the structures of oppression. Edward Said in his latest book, *Culture and Imperialism*, suggests that “[...] when European culture finally began to take due account of imperial “delusions and discoveries” [...], it did so not oppositionally but ironically, and with a desperate attempt at a new inclusiveness” (189). This echoes Fanon's contention that “[...] irony is one of the forms that good conscience assumes. It is true that in the West Indies irony is a mechanism of defense against neurosis. A West Indian, in particular an intellectual who is no longer at the level of irony, discovers his Négritude” (*Toward the African Revolution* 19). In essence, Said and Fanon are saying that irony has a role to play, but in the final analysis it does not propose a satisfactory solution to the problems it attacks, for, as Todorov has so aptly pointed out—in relation to Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*—an ironic tone “allows one to know what is denied but not what is formed” (394). Irony deconstructs, but it can leave us *chocolat*.

To better illustrate the forces at work in Claire Denis' and Jean-Jacques Annaud's films, I have decided to examine how they approach the “overlapping territories,” to borrow another term from Edward Said (212), of geography and sexuality. Geography, because it is, as Said has pointed out, nothing less than the *raison d'être* of imperialism:

The actual possession of land is what empire in the final analysis is all about [...] Imperialism and the culture associated with it affirm both the primacy of geography and an ideology about control of territory. The

geographical sense makes progressions—imaginative, cartographic, military, economic, historical, or in a general sense cultural. It also makes possible the construction of various kinds of knowledge, all of them in one way or another dependent upon the perceived character and destiny of a particular geography. (78)

Sexuality—or rather sex—because it is, along with consumerism, the dominant theme of the postmodern Occident that produces the majority of commercial images; but also because it too is ensconced in the politics of domination; in an enterprise that seeks to control land, minds, and bodies. Geography AND sexuality, because they are inextricably linked in these two films. Denis and Annaud—the former more convincingly than the latter—both succeed, as Camus does so strikingly in his short story “La Femme adultère,” in forging images that present the relationship between woman and geography in sexual terms (Said 176).

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