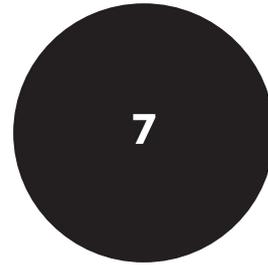




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View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture.

title:

A Historical Materialist in Nollywood

author:

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source:

View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture 7 (2014)

URL:

<http://widok.ibl.waw.pl/index.php/one/article/view/229/427>

publisher:

Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences
Institute of Polish Culture, University of Warsaw

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A Historical Materialist in Nollywood

Translated by Katarzyna Bartoszyńska

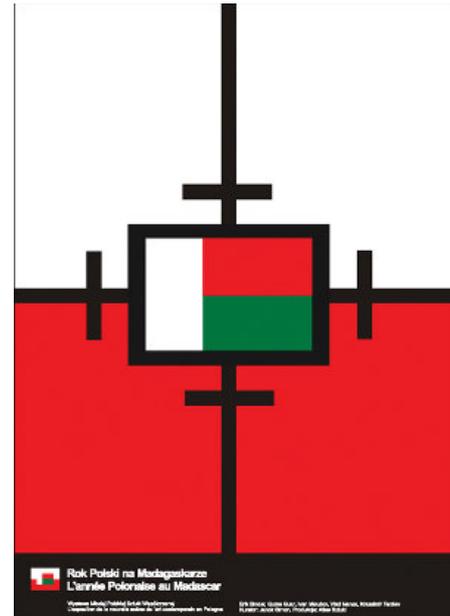
The South and the East have long – at least since the dawn of the 16th century when Africa was circumnavigated by Vasco de Gama's sailors – lain on the far side of the dividing line of anthropological otherness. Africa – or, more broadly speaking, what lies to the South and East of Europe – used to function in the European imagination as the centre of global civilization.¹ The anthropological machine, which slowly emerged in the early modern period, may have been imperfect but by the 19th century there was no way of stopping it. The South-East was concocted as non-human, savage, but also passive and deprived of history – perfect spot for European colonialism. This process had begun decades before colonialism proper, and it culminated towards the end of the 19th century with the Belgian extermination of slaves from Congo (where no one worries about whether the murdered beings are *human* beings). However, the effect of the anthropological machine constructed from the 15th century on was never a binary opposition between human and the non-human (such a simplistic dichotomy would doubtless not have lasted so long). What was produced was more like an *assimilating exclusion*, a mechanism that was to serve in the production of the cheerfully subjugated (convinced that their situation was the result of honest exchange). Thus with great precision, East and South have long found themselves not so much on the other side of a dividing line of anthropological difference, but rather at the very centre of the production of a *field of homogeneity* between the human and the non-human.²

The purpose of Janek Simon's most recent *Travels to the East and the South* was to throw a wrench into the workings of the anthropological machine. In India, Madagascar and Nigeria, the Polish artist shattered linear histories of colonial dependence, profaning them or illuminating the possibility of other approaches to thinking them – considering them in a more autonomous fashion. In this sense, projects such as *Polish Year in Madagascar* or *Ashes and Diamonds in Nollywood*

express two forms of materialistic-historic Luddism, directed against anthropological machines.³

Only apparently grotesque, the backdrop of Simon's *Polish Year in Madagascar* is the long history of the island's imagined colonization by Poland. Its beginnings stretch back to [Beniowski's](#) coronation as the King of Madagascar in 1776 and his death in 1785 as a result of the General's conflicts with French soldiers. The myth of Polish Madagascar that began at that time resurfaced in the 20th century when millions of Poles joined the Maritime and Colonial League. The initial goal of the organization was to recover the island which had been lost to the French after Beniowski's death. Later the League embarked on the mission of sending Polish Jews to live on the island (a mission supported by the French government).⁴ Taking this ludicrous attempt seriously requires effort, but the force of Simon's intervention is based precisely on not treating the actions of the Maritime and Colonial League as a joke or an aberration, but rather as a serious, albeit failed, effort – one symptomatic of colonial projects as a whole. The *Polish Year in Madagascar* project was intended above all to take apart the relations between Poland and Madagascar and then recount the story, or more broadly, to retell a story about the relations between centre and periphery, in such a way that colonial ambitions and designs would cease to represent domination and subjugation. The critique of colonialism (particularly pertinent in relation to current Polish conduct in Iraq and Ukraine) is not carried out along moral lines, but strives, through a grotesque recreation of a culture of domination, to deactivate colonialism's violent and hierarchical nature. The *constellational* character of the *Polish Year*, in which an old oppressive narrative is told anew and thereby shattered,⁵ is further strengthened by Simon's exhibition at the Atlas Sztuki gallery in Łódź, where the documentation of the project is presented. The exhibition consists of works of central-European artists, previously only seen in Antananarivo, as well as of amateur videos of the journey or kitschy souvenirs gathered by the artist.

Obviously, a crucial component of *Polish Year's* success was the specific (semi-peripheral) position it adopted. In the case of a Polish artist, coming from a country



Janek Simon, *Polish Year in Madagascar*, 2006. Courtesy of Raster gallery

that only ever dreamed of being a colonial power, these actions could easily turn into a joke (by repeating the oppressive partitions, their division and reformulation into new constellations). Undertaken by artists from the West and with the support of major cultural institutions (such as the Albert Camus French Institute, or the Goethe Institut), the project would probably have quickly gotten out of control. Simon's method could thus either be interpreted as an artistic critique of colonialism, or the critique of the weaker participants of the colonial project (such as Poland), which developed their own colonial fantasies, ones utterly detached from reality and not even nearly as 'justified' as the colonial plans of the Western Center.

Two other of Simon's works were created in accordance with Benjamin's theories of constellation, collecting what the West had discarded as trash. In the case of the Indian *Alang Transfer* these were primarily objects found at the world's largest maritime junkyard: destroyed information plaques, instructions for putting on lifejackets and using lifeboats, or explaining communication via lights, data signals, or flags. The *Alaba Transfer* project arose from a visit to a major junkyard of electronic waste, in which old material is recycled and returned into circulation in Nigeria. But what Simon does is not a straightforwardly *messianic* halting of the flow of goods and creation of a new *collection* of garbage, severing the goods from their exchange and use value and giving them a new 'connoisseur value'.⁶ Simon does not keep these objects in a gallery - he sells them on Allegro (the biggest Polish online auction site) or out of a booth that he sets up. The *transfer* in both projects can be understood in two ways: either as a *profane* repetition in which the oppressive logic is compounded and deactivated, or as an idea for the creation of a new autonomous market for exchange in which the things that capital had demarcated as trash could become the centre of a new, grassroots production.

Simon's plan to remake Andrzej Wajda's 1958 film, *Ashes and Diamonds*, seems to be one such successful transcendence of the logic of profanation. Nigeria is of course an entirely different country from Madagascar and, unlike that island, has no



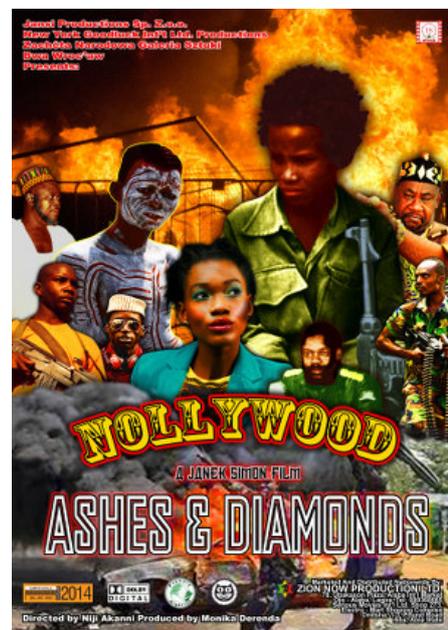
Janek Simon, *Polish Year in Madagascar, 2006–2014* (part of installation at BWA Wrocław), photograph by Justyna Fedec. Courtesy of BWA Wrocław

historical connections to Poland. Lagos, the centre of the African film industry, is a city bursting with contradictions. More than ten million inhabitants of Lagos live on less than a dollar a day, often without running water or electricity. On the other hand, as the capital of a nation whose economy is based on oil, it is brimming with luxury and the cost of living is comparable to that of the richest cities in the world. In a certain sense Nollywood, with a record number of films created each year (over two thousand), can be understood both as a consequence of these contradictions and a specific approach to resolving them. The legendary story of the development of the Nigerian film industry confirms this. In 1992 Kenneth Nnebue came up with an idea for a cheap, amateur cinema, having earlier purchased massive amounts of blank VHS tapes in Taiwan which could not be played in Nigeria. It turned out that the most practical solution to the problem was to fill the tapes with images. This generated an entire wave of amateur film production that rapidly took over not only Nigeria, but the entire region of English-speaking Africa (completely monopolizing it, in fact), and today has spread over the entire globe.

Nollywood not only indicates the possibility of organizing alternative cultural and social circulation,⁷ it also shatters the post-colonial truism about the history of the periphery as dependent on and mimicking the production of the centre. The Nigerian film industry offers an excellent demonstration of the falsity of binary divisions, in which the only active force is hegemonic global capital. As the example of Nollywood proves, capital's might is a reactive one, remaining two steps behind earlier resistance and the production of what is held in common.⁸ Simon's remake of *Ashes and Diamonds* does not take place in a desert of social production⁹ (in which one can only strive, to greater or lesser effect, to deactivate the anthropological machine), but in a place where the creation of languages, images and the



Janek Simon, *Polish Year in Madagascar, 2006-2014* (part of installation at BWA Wrocław), photograph by Justyna Fedec. Courtesy of BWA Wrocław



Janek Simon, *Ashes and Diamonds in Nollywood*, poster, 2014. Courtesy of Raster gallery

relationships between them, happens on a scale unheard of elsewhere. From this perspective, the machine producing divisions between the human and the non-human is not so much deactivated as it is abandoned by indifferent Nigerians. The Nollywood-organized *exodus* clearly demonstrates that in order to halt the functioning of the anthropological machine Agamben describes, it is not enough to destroy it and render the divisions created by it meaningless.¹⁰ Above all else, one must *exit* the age-old dualisms the anthropological machine produces, according to which the natural, the in-human and the wild is simultaneously passive, derivative and dependent.¹¹ In this sense, the filmmakers in Nollywood call to mind modern-day pirates,¹² organizing autonomous networks of cooperation and production, or indentured labourers fleeing farms along with their entire inventory,¹³ rather than passive Nigerians wholly subjected to the divisions produced by modern-day capitalism.

Of course, it is hard to predict what shape the Nigerian version of *Ashes and Diamonds* will finally take, but according to the producer (Simon) and the director (Mahmood Ali-Baloguna), it is to be concerned first and foremost with establishing the universality of Polish historical conflicts, which Wajda's film presents without taking a clear position. Regardless of whether Polish conflicts can be translated into Nigerian reality (for example, by recounting the heretofore censored history of the Nigerian civil war, which took place in the 1960's), what remains of this confrontation is above all the uselessness of historical discussions restricted to narratives created by elites (be they ruling or oppositional). This is especially relevant to the history of Nigerian cinema, created in contrary to the logic of mass capital, with no assistance from the State and in conditions of intense ethnic and religious division. Nollywood, like earlier workers' and student movements established during the times of the Polish People's Republic, culminating in the mass movement of the first Solidarity,¹⁴ indicates the possibility of an alternative current of social production, at the same time providing the opportunity for an alternative – a vision of history against the grain, in which ethnic tensions can be overcome under the auspices of a struggle for the common good.

Research and work on the essay were financed by the Preludium grant of the Narodowe Centrum Nauki number 2011/03/N/HS1/04592.

Footnotes

1 For a thorough description see: Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350* (New York-Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

2 Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 37. For an interesting interpretation of Agamben by Kathryn Milun see: Kathryn Milun, *The Political Uncommons: The Cross-Cultural Logic of the Global Commons* (Duluth: University of Minnesota Duluth, 2010), 41-45.

3 This is where the task of 'brushing history against the grain' of Benjamin's historical materialist comes from. Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in: idem, *Selected Writings: Volume 4: 1938-1940*, ed. H. Eiland, M.W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 392.

4 The fact that until 2007 the current Polish President, Bronisław Komorowski, was the leader of the Maritime League (an organization with an unbroken historical connection to the famous Maritime and Colonial League) certainly adds topicality to Simon's project.

5 See: Walter Benjamin, "One-Way Street," in: idem, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. E. Jephcott, K. Shorter (London: NLB, 1979).

6 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. H. Eiland, K. McLaughlin (London-Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 9.

7 Simon demonstrates the possibility of mobilizing this kind of escape in his other works, which are based on the idea of an amateur production of knowledge and with subjects similar to that constructed by the artist in his *Homemade Electronic Watch*, as well as during a lecture given in Wolfsburg on *Edible Plants and Animals of Lower Saxony* or his *Sculptures from the Museum of a Man in Paris Recreated from the Drawings of Oskar Hansen and Lech Kunki and Printed on a Homemade 3d Printer*.

8 Peter Linebaugh, *Stop, Thief! The Commons, Enclosures and Resistance* (Oakland: PM Press, 2014). Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth*

(Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009).

9 Of course Madagascar was such a desert. Nigeria on the other hand should be perceived as an *estuary*: a stream that can no longer be blocked, rather than an individual accident. From this perspective, Madagascar's reaction is an effect of the way in which its history is narrated, not of the actual socio-cultural situation on the island. About the estuary see: Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*.

Capitalism and Schizophrenia, trans. R. Hurley, M. Seem, H. R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 194.

10 Giorgio Agamben, *The Open*, 92.

11 On the production of the non-human see: Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions: on Nomadic Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 37. Of course, Braidotti draws on a long line of philosophical thought. This perspective is most clearly described in its political botany by Marsilius of Padua, and in its political ontology by Spinoza.

12 On the subject of the autonomy of pirate struggles: Peter Linebaugh, Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 143-174. The power of the 18th century pirate nation is best attested to not only by political or military conflicts with pirates, but also by the philosophical discursive machine mobilized against them, with contributions from Hobbes, Locke or, many years later, Carl Schmitt. See: Carl Schmitt *Der Nomos der Erde* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1974), 143-156.

13 Sandro Mezzadra, "The Topicality of Prehistory: A New Reading of Marx's Analysis of *So-called Primitive Accumulation*," *Rethinking Marxism* 23:3 (2011), 302-321.

14 The first Solidarity is understood here as an element of the people's history, in which the struggle is waged in the name of collective property and thus against privatization - regardless of whether it is promoted by Communist Party bureaucracy or by neoliberal transformation. See: Jan Sowa, "An Unexpected Twist of Ideology. Neoliberalism and the Collapse of the Soviet Bloc," *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 1 (2012), <http://www.praktykateoretyczna.pl/jan-sowa-an-unexpected-twist-of-ideology/>, accessed January 5, 2014.