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Internal contradictions: on the coloniality of the global film industries

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a broad selection of intersecting frames of coloniality, in various global film industry examples. I mobilise Priya Jaikumar's claims about 'the internal contradictions of a modernised language of empire' (Jaikumar. 2006. *Cinema at the End of Empire: A Politics of Transition in Britain and India*, 8–9. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press) in Indian film history, as a way of understanding continuing coloniality, which permeates and largely determines structures across the global film industries today. The article engages historical transnational and examples (including postcolonial India, postcolonial Nigeria, and postcolonial Latin American cinema) and discourses of imperial nationhood (in the US and UK contexts), as a way of pronouncing insistent forms of imperial power. Turning finally to a case study from the centre of the European film industry—the Berlinale World Cinema Fund—the article considers to what extent decolonial work might be conceivable within the context of the post-imperial film industries.

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This article approaches the colonial afterlives of today's film industry landscape in its totality – one which must be approached as widely as possible in order to comprehend the globality of the colonial order as it exists, hidden or otherwise, within contemporary film practices. Of course, the limitations of this particular space will severely prohibit the depth I am able to provide with some of my examples, but I am making a case for the broad, not the narrow, here. This is the demand placed on us by decolonisation; it is implied, to some extent surely, in *all* the available 'decolonial options' (Escobar and Mignolo 2010). Even in the most localised of examples, to theorise a systematic challenge to pervasive coloniality entails speculative application to an enormous cross-section of different historical, political and cultural contexts. My intention here is to convene a range of geographically disparate frames of reference as representative of the coloniality of the global film industries today. Coloniality in this sense is used to refer to the global system organised by hierarchies separating the old ways and the new, which has been constitutive of modernity itself (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 4). This resulted in the social and cultural logics of

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colonialism proper but also the rationale for global inequalities of all kinds. Coloniality underpins the enforcement of state borders and the denial of mixing, the ideology of an enlightenment defined above all on White supremacy and the ordering of all 'others' around a 'colonial matrix of power' (Quijano 2000). Coloniality refers to much more than the expropriation and exploitation of land and peoples by foreign states; it names the way of thinking that precedes and outlives historical colonialisms, which in turn names the material afterlives of colonialism as it is embodied by today's global inequalities.

Understood as a system, a way of thinking, an *idea* which underpins modernity itself, coloniality has everything to do with cinema – the quintessential *modern* artform; a 'culture industry' emblematic of a 'dialectic of enlightenment' (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002). Western critical theories have explained how the cinematic technology was a thing of goodness, deeply and universally humanistic, and arguing that it was the commoditisation of the art form which was bad. Historical writings on national film industries continue to abide by classical approaches, motivated by the specificity of their respective social and cultural contexts. There is little attention paid, if at all, to the coloniality embodied by these film industries – and this is my concern with this article. I divide this into three parts in order to (1) suggest pertinent examples of colonial power determining historical film industry examples across postcolonial nations in the global south; (2) summarise the ambivalent relationship with anti-racism (superficially embraced) and anti-colonialism (practically absent) in western film industries; and finally (3) offer a concrete example of a western film industry effort to confront its own coloniality and, as such, the postimperial film industries at large. Turning to the Berlinale and its creation of a 'World Cinema Fund' (hereafter, BWCF), the article closes with a critical consideration of the extent to which the centre of the global film industries is capable of decolonising.

Global film industries and decolonisation

While not always obvious, there is a way of understanding the film industries within a long history of colonialism. That said, the intersection between cinema and empire has tended to be more present in scholarship preoccupied with histories of the global south. Engaging with this writing provides a deeper understanding of the ways in which colonialism has determined both the cultural and economic dimensions of contemporary filmic practice. The Indian context provides a guiding example. Priya Jaikumar has explained how cinema's emergence in the late nineteenth century 'participated in the internal contradictions of a modernised language of empire' (Jaikumar 2006, 8–9). Such contradictions symbolise a clash between an imperial authority which, on the one hand, imposed liberalism but is on the other hand thwarted by liberal values of consent and participation. These contradictions are not merely symbolic of geopolitical tensions and historical change, though. Rather, throughout the course of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, the contradictory impulses of postimperialism (referring to the hegemonic social and cultural structures derivative of imperial power, within formerly imperial states) bleed into so many different facets of the global film industries, in ways that come to determine the contemporary landscape of production, distribution and exhibition.

As global power shifted in the twentieth century, imperial states often instituted quota systems to defend against Hollywood supremacy.¹ At the same time, these nations invested in the creation of mass cinema audiences in urban centres. In colonial India,

this led to the enforcement and normalisation of social hierarchies which were directly connected to British imperial policies of social and economic stratification. Audiences of the era were assumed to embody what Manishita Dass describes as ‘an unthinking emulation of western habits and lifestyles’, or a source of disorder; the colonial cinema became ‘a zone of contestations, a space of emergent identities’ (Dass 2009, 94–98). When the British Raj left in 1947, investment in cinema was impacted by both partition and governmental preference for high culture (Fischer-Tiné 2022, 368). Imperial presence remains then, long after decolonisation. This is reflected in the wider landscape of the postcolonial film industries across Asia, demonstrative of markets serving colonial monopolies (Boonyaketmala 1992), censorship laws ensuring favourable representation of white Europeans (Said 1992) and the cultural and economic stranglehold of Hollywood’s distributive dominance (Tiongson 1992). The new world order unfolding through the Cold War results in a changing of power, but this does not lead to postcolonial independence. Instead, it represents what might be described as a neocolonial US presence throughout Asia (Lam 2023).

In this context, the relative strength of the Indian film industry is especially significant. In 1930s Bombay, a distinctive new sound cinema emerged, utilising a ‘production and exhibition infrastructure ... that was poised, even then, to become the largest in the world’ (Rajadhyaksha 2003, 33). By the 1950s, Indian cinema also produced a revolutionary cinematic backlash in the form of an artistic movement often cited as an influence on many European film modernisms. Both Bollywood and Parallel Cinema represent forms of national cinema which emerged in the wake of colonialism, more concerned with relating and conveying the experiences of local audiences than with mimicking or kowtowing to foreign styles. Today, following the postcolonial migrations of the twentieth century which constituted the largest diaspora community in the world, there is a global Indian audience familiar with the cultural specificity of Bollywood film language (Dudrah 2006). This demonstrates how the internal contradictions of postimperial industries provided a fertile grounding for emergent postcolonial industries (albeit to the expense of other, smaller, further minoritised film industries, elsewhere in South Asia). If we approach the Indian context as a major postcolonial cinema industry² we avoid the tendency to force it into an existing Eurocentric historical narrative which ghettoises ‘world cinema’, while at the same time acknowledging its historical emergence within a colonial, postcolonial and neocolonial global film industry landscape.

The internal contradictions of postimperialism exist also in the Nigerian video industry. Nollywood emerged in the aftermath of European colonialism and attained unprecedented popularity with its medium through a dispersed audience. Postcolonial migrations (occurring through persecutions of postimperial regimes which were backed by western powers, or impossible financial limitations, or experiencing the brunt of climate change) produced a diasporic spectatorship with resultant similarities to the Bollywood example. The scarce resources of the Nigerian video industry, though, provides a stark contrast to the comparatively wealthy Hindi film industry. As recently as 2021, Haile Gerima claimed that ‘there is not a single African film industry’; that African cinema is ‘financed by outside capital’ and that ‘African filmmakers are powerless and in most cases don’t even do the films that they want to do’. ‘Neocolonialism’, Gerima writes, ‘selectively finances those ideas that it considers important to be made ... African filmmakers today write ... films for ... Europeans and Americans’ (Gerima 2021, 174).

Born in Ethiopia, Gerima moved to the US to study, eventually joining the famous 'LA Rebellion' group of filmmakers at UCLA. Just as Gerima's thesis film, *Bush Mama* (1979), was being released in independent cinemas in the US, the first Inter-African Film Distribution Consortium (CIDC) formed and set out to restructure the shape of the African film industry. The CIDC purchased the distribution circuits in the majority of sub-Saharan Francophone Africa, taking over the monopoly previously held by the French exhibition chain, UGC (Barlet 2023, 220). This intervention spoke to an appetite for revolutionary change in the African film industries of the 1980s, which was spearheaded by the so-called father of African cinema, Ousmane Sembene, who would organise the First International Conference on Cinema Production in Africa in Niamey, Niger. Sembene and other African filmmakers, critics, officials from several African countries and international cinema experts, collectively authored a manifesto determining general principles and recommendations for the future direction of the African film industries. What comes across clearly, both in the manifesto and in Sembene's reflections on the event (Sembene 1995), is the impossibility of national cinemas and the necessity of a pan-African film industry. Niamey would build on meetings enabled by FESPACO (the Festival of Pan-African Film and Television in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso) and FEPACI (2021) (the Pan-African Federation of Filmmakers) to institute governing systems and agreements between state representatives and cultural organisations. Despite the incredible work undertaken during this period, the fact that Gerima is describing a neocolonial film industry in contemporary Africa demonstrates the resilience of imperial structures in the globalised neoliberal film economy. The phenomenon of Nollywood does not contradict this; rather, it is an effect of this history. The video industry is an example of using something other than 'the master's tools' to work (Lorde 1984). As Ikechukwu Obiaya has argued, Nollywood 'adopted a model which bears no relation whatever to the colonial filmmaking structure' and 'its success could be said to arise from its very ability to overcome the strictures of the inherited approach to filmmaking' (Obiaya 2011, 131).

While Gerima was at UCLA and Sembene convened Niamey, Nigerian film production was largely continuous with the structures in place during the colonial era, with most films made for informational or educational purposes. However, the relatively small amount of independent, Yoruba-language productions, found a sizeable audience (ibid., 139-41). An economic depression in the 1980s led to the collapse of the celluloid film industry in Nigeria; video provided an alternative route around the remaining economic binds of the colonial film industry. In Obiaya's terms, the video industry 'did not set itself an agenda of decolonisation, rather it found out that success for it required ... finding a way around, the existing strictures that had kept it dependent' (ibid., 131). Rejecting the methods and networks of the colonial film industries, Nollywood might be aligned with other indigenous film practices, which are also constituted altogether outside of the global film circuits (Fatubun 2023; Sonza 2018). As Michelle H. Raheja has explained, 'the very foundations on which the master's house is built are Indigenous and should be reterritorialized or repatriated'; unlike the revolutionary anti-colonial film movements of the 1960s and 1970s, this example demonstrates how indigenous film practices have roots in historically and locally particular indigenous aesthetics (Raheja 2011, 17-18).

Raheja's distinction between the culturally specific forms of indigenous practice and the oppositional modes of Latin American Third Cinema is revealing. Not unlike the aforementioned Indian context, the construction of mass audiences in Buenos Aires and Rio de

Janeiro was similarly constitutive of social hierarchies. As Ana M. López has explained, those governing the early years of the Latin American film industries were usually European elites and never indigenous populations (López 2000, 51). Expressions of indigeneity were mobilised in the service of the modern national identity, 'precariously balanced between indigenous traditions and foreign influence' (ibid. 61). López describes this as 'an embryonic form of cinematic nationness'; people occupying the documentary images of early cinema become 'metaphorical stand-ins for the nation itself' (ibid.).

As much as the national film industries across Latin America became increasingly influential through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries,³ national film production remains determined largely by colonial systems. Libia Villazana refers to the Motion Picture Association of America's partnerships with film production companies like Ibermedia and Patagonik as pertinent examples of US neocolonial practices in the region. Moreover, more historic colonial systems pervade Latin America in the form of Spanish co-productions, which account for the majority of its film production (Villazana 2008, 68). Tamara Falicov has analysed how, before and immediately following the 2008 financial market crash, Ibermedia production financing exceeded the total sum of all Latin American state funding for cinema combined. In both the Spanish and Portuguese postimperial contexts (e.g. the Instituto do Cinema e do Audiovisual [ICA] funding for Brazilian productions), many view these mechanisms as an informal mode of historical reparations (Falicov 2018, 374–375) or at least indicative of 'historical debt' (Elena 2013, 155).⁴ In this sense then, Latin American postcolonial cinema is to a great extent determined by contradictory postimperial film industry mechanisms, which are simultaneously viewed as a remnant of the past and a path towards a different future.

While summative, this disparate set of examples is cited to demonstrate some of the ways in which coloniality has determined (and largely continues to determine) film production in the postcolonial global south. Particularly in the African context, it is commonplace to analyse film practices within a colonial frame. In Francophone African nations, French neoliberal film policies employ the same neocolonial techniques as Latin American financing.⁵ What is on one level important financial aid for film production, is on another level a 'form of "national cinema" at home and in other countries', simply conducive for the maintaining of historical ties that bind (Hoefert de Turégano 2002, 29).⁶ This tension between goodwill and bad faith is further evidence of the internal contradictions involved in the modernised language of the postimperial film industries.

Approaching the film industries of previously colonised nations within a framework of coloniality provides a way of understanding the historical constraints and innovations determining the state of filmic practices today. But it is worth inquiring, at this juncture, why coloniality is an epistemological frame typically reserved for these national industries and not for the film industries of postimperial nations. *Why not consider the coloniality of industries whose economic and cultural prosperity comes from the capital derived from empire?* It is with this question in mind that the second part of this article asks: *is any decolonial work being done in western film industries?*

Postimperial film industries

Two Hollywood celebrities – the US actor Mark Ruffalo and the Māori director Taika Waititi – have recently used public platforms to remind the industry that Hollywood studios sit

on unceded indigenous territories. It has become quite commonplace for institutions to similarly acknowledge the occupation and habitation of native land. Unlike the informal financial aid system operating across the Iberian and Francophone film industries, Hollywood's rhetorical strategies appear to act as a substitute for actual material reparations. The real decolonial work historically undertaken in the industry has instead been initiated by those whose heritage has been determined by colonialism. Raheja credits a 1940 petition authored by Chief Thunder Cloud (who acquired fame as Tonto in *The Lone Ranger* [John English and William Witney 1938]) as marking a shift 'from white-generated stereotypes to a politicised understanding' of Native Americans (Raheja 2011, 1–2). Chief Thunder Cloud's work would lead to the formation of a guild for Native film workers within the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Jacob Floyd goes back further, to 1924, when the Cherokee performer White Bird founded the War Paint Club as a support agency for Native actors (Floyd 2021). Despite these earlier interventions, indigenous people nevertheless remain an extremely under-represented community in Hollywood – both on screen and behind the camera.

Mobilisations and calls for reparations across BIPOC communities are becoming more pronounced in the work of Black-led organisations, whose collective agencies now take myriad forms and represent the full breadth of the film industry workforce in the US. The National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) has officially supported financial reparations since 1993; in 2019, this was strengthened with an updated list of resolutions, emphasising entitlement to land and social services (NAACP 2019). The updated statement accompanied a Congress hearing, which included contributions by Ta-Nehisi Coates (whose 'The Case for Reparations' [2014] is credited for revitalising the demands in the wider public consciousness) and the actor, Danny Glover. The platform assumed by people like Glover (who in many ways is continuing the civil rights efforts of stars including Paul Robeson, Lena Horne and Harry Belafonte before him) to demand financial compensation for slavery is a great leap from the diluted (but nonetheless important) efforts towards greater representational diversity. This is demonstrative perhaps of the ways in which politicised Black organisations in the US have focused attention on the material consequences of colonialism, as something which has had dire economic and social effects on racialised communities, and which must at least be compensated.

We can position the 2019 US congressional hearing on reparations within a wider ecology of decolonial initiatives which traverse the filmic, cultural and social realms. This in turn anticipates the transnational wave of anti-racist protest following the police murder of George Floyd on a street in Minneapolis in 2020, and the subsequent wave of solidarity statements made by cultural organisations. Where publicly funded bodies have convened around such statements, there is a clear incentive to contest the disinterest of postimperial nation states in material reparations. The ability for organisations within the wider creative industries to retain this level of vocal autonomy has led Anamik Saha to propose a 'reparative justice' programme. This would work to disperse uneven 'concentrations of media power' and provide material support for the independent producers of media based within marginalised communities (Saha 2024, 24–25). Aforementioned examples in Spain, Portugal and France clearly relate to this notion of reparative justice, whereby state institutions responsible for maintaining (power) relations with former colonies can be relied upon for financial aid, which might in turn benefit the

visibility of marginalised communities on a global stage. In the UK, the British Film Institute (BFI) reserves funding for the full spectrum of film work – from archival research to production and distribution – which is directed towards marginalised communities. But again, there is a notable unwillingness to frame such mechanisms within a discourse of coloniality. Given the many examples of decolonisation strategies elsewhere in the cultural sector, it is not unreasonable to inquire about the reason for this absence.

The lack of engagement by public bodies with colonial histories leads to the suspicion that collaborative funding is a film industry variant of neocolonial ‘settler moves to innocence’ (Tuck and Yang 2012, 9). While organisations like the BFI offer important support for practitioners of colour, they do so on racial terms alone; they choose to not elaborate on the relationship between, for instance, Black British subjects and the postcolonial diasporas. This is a choice, not an accident or an oversight; choosing not to historicise socially and economically marginalised groups (especially in the case of racialised groups) as a legacy of colonialism is a way of masking contradiction. And the mask, in this sense, is the fiction of national unity – that is, the idea of postimperial nationhood as a mode of citizenry shared by all its people. Writing in the Canadian context, Jonathan Paquette, Devin Beauregard and Christopher Gunter revisited the Laurendeau – Dunton Commission, which served as a prelude for Canada’s Official Languages Act (1969). The act was intended to ease tensions between Francophone and Anglophone communities during burgeoning Québécois nationalism. The commission found that, in their endeavours to protect the rights of Francophone and Anglophone populations, policymakers had historically ignored the existence of displaced indigenous populations, their languages, and the territory itself. This example represents how, in such superficial attempts to protect diverse cultural interests, so called ‘other cultures’ can often be simply elided with ‘a policy orientation focused on national unity through the celebration of a new collective identity’ (Paquette, Beauregard, and Gunter 2017, 275–276). This prioritisation of national unity happens all over postimperial nation states, and it presents an overwhelming obstacle for the very idea of reparative justice within public bodies. The depth of this challenge can be summarised with one question: *is there a single example of a state-funded film industry body in a postimperial state which is not preoccupied with promoting some idea of unified nationhood?*

In addition to the clear ‘no’ obviously implied as answer to the above, I want to briefly offer the film festival as a site for the potential appropriation of state-backed film mechanisms towards decolonial work. On the face of it, film festivals are not typically radical spaces designed to interrupt the flows of global capital and colonial power structures. Some of the oldest European film festivals are still the most influential ones in the world (Venice and Cannes before the second world war, Berlin shortly after it); with these examples, power is concentrated within postimperial nations and the events boost the cultural as much as the fiscal economies of their respective nations. The formation and consolidation of power at international film festivals has been written about comprehensively elsewhere (De Valck 2007; Stringer 2001). Less common is a consideration of the film festival within a framework of coloniality. Lindiwe Dovey’s *Curating Africa in the Age of Film Festivals* is a significant text in this regard, insofar as it situates the emergence of African film festivals ‘within a continuum of European ideas and practices of curation and colonialism’ (Dovey 2015, 25).⁷ Mirroring neocolonial co-production practices, historically, film festivals remain a fraught space for African filmmakers for economic

reasons, too. In Falicov's terms, 'while it may be true that the South needs opportunities and support from the North to survive, it is equally true ... that the North needs the South to be *avant la lettre*' (Falicov 2010, 18). From this perspective, the sustenance and maintenance of festivals in the south might itself be considered a colonial remnant. But Dovey has also highlighted the 'close relationship between film festivals and the ideals of anti-colonial political resistance in Africa' (ibid. 133). As FESPACO crucially represents, festivals have provided vital meeting points for convening and planning resistant practices. However, in the same way as western film histories need to be embedded just as routinely in their colonial apparatuses as they are in the global south, so too does the contemporary festival space.⁸

Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong has described the 'taste-making' quality of European film festivals, 'reinstating colonial relations of power and taste that are uneasily read by filmmakers and diplomats' (Wong 2011, 60–61).⁹ While Wong is referring to the major European festivals in this regard, Rachel Johnson has referred to more minor, socially and politically-thematised events and argues for the analysis of film festivals 'both holistically and comparatively, considering their complexity as events that might simultaneously resist and reproduce colonial power relations ... refusing to reduce festivals'. Doing so, Johnson explains, would entail a consideration of 'complex interactions between festivals' different facets: their organisational structures, internal hierarchies, programming, locations, engagement with audiences, and place within local/regional cultural industries' (Johnson 2025, 129). Viviane Saglier's analysis of the Franco Arab Film Festival in Palestine is concerned with such interactions, in ways which again underline the internal contradictions – or what Saglier terms the 'double nature' of the festival. Saglier coins 'unstable sustainability' to describe the ways in which the festival is 'simultaneously disconnected from the local economy and the vehicle of larger economic power structures ... embedded in the very landscape of the Territories by the repurposing of spaces and the temporary occupation of infrastructures' (Saglier 2014, 54). Taking these approaches into consideration (particularly Saglier's notion of repurposing occupation), I approach the Berlinale as a space ripe with neocolonial potential which might, nevertheless, resist colonial power relations. I consider BWCF as a resonant case study, in this regard. Following earlier mention of similar historical funds in the Spanish-Portuguese/Latin American examples and the French-African examples, I am interested to what extent this more recently initiated, festival-aligned scheme differs from top-down financing models. In turn, this considers to what extent the BWCF reinforces colonial relations and/or relinquishes a certain amount of its postimperial authority.

The Berlinale's World Cinema Fund

The BWCF was founded in 2004 through the investment of the German Federal Cultural Foundation, with the intention of promoting the production and distribution of non-European feature and documentary films. The foundation emphasises its desire to 'strengthen cinema as a "venue" and community-building experience' and to 'improve outreach in the countries of origin' (as explained on the Kulturstiftung des Bundes website). Initially, the fund functioned as a resource for financing co-productions with global south practitioners, listing countries across Africa, Asia (with the notable exceptions of China and India) and Latin America. Eligible applicants are limited to films budgeted between

€600,000-1.4 million, with a maximum funding ceiling of €60,000. More than 350 films have so far received funding and, in 2024, 12 of these films screened at the festival – 2 of them premiering in the main competition, to critical acclaim and subsequent international distribution.

One of these films is *Pepe* (2024),¹⁰ which went on to win the Silver Bear for the Dominican, Nelson Carlo De Los Santos Arias as Best Director. *Pepe* is an experimental film narrated by the sub-aquatic-sounding voice of a hippo who has just been killed following the capture of Pablo Escobar, who trafficked him to Medellín from Namibia. Pepe speaks three languages (Afrikaans, Spanish and Mbukushu) and he is the sole example of his species to have been killed on the continent. The film leaps around in time and space, challenging conventional modes of (typically anthropocentric) historical fictions. It is fair to say that both the Silver Bear and the €120,000 it received from the BWCF is testament to the Berlinale's support for boldly experimental films from small film industries. Arias was awarded funding by the same scheme in 2014 for his previous film, *Cocote* (2017). Both films' narratives revolve around acts of violence, which is considered a trope in outsider perspectives on Latin America (Mandolessi, Dhondt, and Zicari 2022). This might therefore be viewed to exemplify European funders' tendency to 'commission the exotic' (Falicov 2010, 7) and their proclivity for practitioners whose work reinforces dominant cultural narratives of otherness. On the other hand, in so far as these films are preoccupied with the structural and often transnational networks underpinning said violence, backing these films might be seen to problematise such tropes. The fund can be seen to support challenges to codified narratives formed by foreign imaginaries. Related examples here include *Post Mortem* (Pablo Larraín 2010, awarded €50,000 in 2009); *Citadel* (Diego Mondaca 2011, awarded €30,000 in 2009); *Carne de Perro* (Fernando Guzzoni 2012, awarded €40,000 in 2011); *Monos* (Alejandro Landes and Alexis Dos Santos 2019, awarded €40,000 in 2014); and *Blanco en Blanco* (Theo Court 2019, awarded €45,000 in 2017).

For all its merit, the scheme might still be viewed as another version of previously mentioned state support mechanisms, which predate it elsewhere in Europe. The BWCF also mirrors similar festival-aligned funding schemes in this regard, such as the International Film Festival Rotterdam's 'Hubert Bals Fund' (named after the festival's first director), which has been running since 1988. Miriam Ross has critiqued the Hubert Bals Fund's criteria of 'cultural authenticity' and its dedication to films' which adhere to 'developing worlds modes of being' (Ross 2011, 264). While its set of funding criteria appear broader than the apparent colonial gaze sought in Rotterdam, the BWCF has been associated with a persistent rhetoric of cultural authenticity. Eren Odabasi describes its focus on applicants who are 'dealing with the cultural identity of the region, visual and creative innovativeness, and the potential for international success (and consequently contributing to the development of the local film culture)' (Odabasi 2021, 67). By gathering first-hand testimonials from directors whose films have received funding, Odabasi locates a shameful paradox: 'filmmakers... are required to prove how authentic and locally rooted their projects are in order to attract global, delocalised funds and exhibit their films primarily to a Western European audience outside their countries of origin upon completion' (ibid., 81). Irrespective of the structural critique engaged in some of the filmic examples above, Ross's and Odabasi's attention to the way notions of cultural authenticity and identity are fetishised remains relevant.

In 2016, the fund's role appears to change slightly. A new scheme, WCF Africa, was introduced to support the distribution and exhibition of already-completed productions from sub-Saharan African nations. Considering each of Odabasi's case studies benefitted from this scheme, and the apparently neocolonial practices prevailing here, the choice of geographies (sub-Saharan nations, with populations predominantly racialised as Black, contrasted with the north African nations) should be highlighted. This regional focus should also be framed in relation to the BWCF's original objectives: 'to promote high-quality filmmaking in regions with a weak infrastructure for film, while fostering cultural diversity in German cinemas as well as supporting collaboration between German and European producers' (Berlinale website). If we take the asserted intention and the resultant effect into account, the BWCF appears to operate as a microcosm of neocolonial practices (investing in order to extract from 'regions with a weak infrastructure') within a neoliberal economy (that is, flows of cultural and financial capital, mutually beneficial to postimperial powers). This effectively proves Falicov's argument, that 'the North needs the South to be *avant la lettre*' (Falicov 2010, 18). African films are reaching audiences they might not have otherwise reached; but it is only a *certain kind* of film. And it does not benefit the local audience so much as it does the European one. The BWCF has created an efficient production line for new forms of postcolonial representation, which appears to offer nothing like the sort of agency it promises.

A year before the introduction of WCF Africa, the Berlinale introduced the 'WCF Day', which is framed as a public think-tank that takes place within the framework of the festival. Each year addresses a specific theme and in 2021 the event was titled, 'Decolonising Cinema'. Reflective of wider embodiments of solidarity organised across western cultural spaces, this must be viewed as a rare expression of anti-colonial commitment by a major film institution, which relates to cinema itself (i.e. as a technology, artform and a global industry historically as well as today). The event was held online during the COVID pandemic and featured panel discussions with filmmakers who had received BWCF funding, as well as scholars and curators. I wish to follow Lindiwe Dovey and Estrella Sendra in viewing 'Decolonising Cinema' as an attempt to resituate the BWCF from a neocolonial mechanism towards 'a decentralisation of festival space' (Dovey and Sendra 2023, 281). More than just a topical theme for discussion, by framing cinema itself as a thing that constitutes/is constituted by colonialism (and must, therefore, be *decolonised*), this event implicitly acknowledges the fact that the Berlinale, as a major site of film industry, is a benefactor of colonialism. This pronouncement, albeit implied, regarding the institution's historical positionality, irrespective of intention, is a formalised recognition of its imperial function. The rarity of such acknowledgements is not to be shunned. It threatens both the superficial humanitarianism it has helped cultivate throughout film festival history and the homogenising national unity which state-backed bodies are expected to promote. While seemingly minor, the Berlinale's embrace of a decolonial mission with the WCF Day 2021 stands as an important precedent for other similarly powerful film institutions.

A symbiotic relationship?

In Falicov's critique of European funding mechanisms for global south artists, she argues that such schemes could be viewed to commission the exotic and shape narratives to fit

local tastes. Yet, in their increasing reliance on the themes and aesthetics of postcolonial cinema, the very definition of ‘the festival film’ has itself changed, centring these films, creating demand, in turn disrupting the power dynamic and producing a ‘symbiotic relationship’ (Falicov 2010, 18). I would argue, though, that a symbiotic relationship should, by definition, be mutually beneficial. While it might be beneficial to individual practitioners, we might ask (borrowing Saglier’s terms) to what extent the temporary occupation of infrastructure has improved the sustainability of the respective film industries touched by the funds. In her emphasis on the cultural and aesthetic achievements of festival funding mechanisms, over and above the social and economic factors, Falicov’s symbiosis neglects the continuing disparity between postimperial festival dominance and postcolonial film industries. In its critical reflexivity, the Berlinale’s World Cinema Fund Day provides at least implied acknowledgement of such disparities. Without this, a symbiotic model which envisions mutual benefit again appears to mask the internal contradictions of postimperial power.

While its institutional critique is admirable, and while it is crucial to have exemplars for posterity and precedent, it is similarly important to retain a critical position and recognise that the ‘Decolonising Cinema’ event has not changed very much of material consequence. But if we are to envisage something like a decolonised cinema from the position of postimperial film institutions, acknowledging positionality is a crucial first step.

Notes

1. The British government pioneered this tendency with the Cinematograph Films Act in 1927, as a way of defending its declining film industry. While initially a mode of economic and ideological defence for nation states in the global north, examples of similar legislation are notable by the military junta in Brazil in 1932 and in US-aligned South Korea in 1966.
2. See Schaefer and Karan (2012) and Ashcroft (2012) for more in this regard.
3. Mexico was the fourth largest cinema audience in 2022 and, along with Brazil, is forecast to be a top 10 industry for revenue by 2026, with numbers comparable to France, South Korea and India.
4. David Martin-Jones and María Soledad Montañez’s article (2009) on New Uruguayan Cinema is useful in this regard.
5. The French National Centre of Cinema (CNC) has a ‘World Cinema Fund’ for this purpose.
6. Carolin Overhoff Ferreira has termed this ‘ambivalent transnationality’ in the Luso-African context (2012).
7. Ruby Cheung’s work on Hong Kong International Film Festival is also illuminating in this regard in an alternative context (Cheung 2016).
8. Dorota Ostrowska and Tamara L. Falicov’s edited collection, *Shaping Film Festivals in a Changing World Practice and Methods*, devotes a section of several chapters to this issue.
9. Wong’s argument goes on to utilise the Hong Kong International Film Festival as an important site of postcolonial production/reproduction, in this sense, further problematising the divide between north/south power relations in the postcolonial/postimperial film industries.
10. The other is *My Favourite Cake* (Maryam Moghadam and Behtash Sanaeieha 2024), which is a romantic comedy by two Iranian filmmakers who have been banned from making films at home in Iran.

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