

CHOCOLAT AND BLACK VENUS: BODY, IDENTITY AND MEMORY

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the possible discursive developments around the female body in movies, using *Chocolat* (Claire Denis, 1998) and *Black Venus* (Abdellatif Kechiche, 2010); bearing in mind this body as an object of desire, a space of resistance, a cultural and ethnical frontier, or even as a vestige of history and memory. Through theoretical, esthetical and political articulations about these images, and through the analysis of these films, we will attempt to understand how intercultural cinema – which is able to create new images from the memory of the senses, since it possesses tactile and contagious qualities, with which the spectator is confronted as if he was connecting with another body (Marks, 2000) – becomes an instrument of representation of a possible cultural history and memory, precisely by means of the role that bodies – removed from their original environment – play in the construction of this cultural history and memory.

KEYWORDS

Cinema; body; interculturality; memory; post-colonialism; representation

CHOCOLAT E VÊNUS NEGRA: CORPO, IDENTIDADE E MEMÓRIA

RESUMO

Este artigo analisa os possíveis desdobramentos discursivos em torno da representação do corpo feminino no cinema a partir de *Chocolat* (Claire Denis, 1988) e *Vênus negra* (Abdellatif Kechiche, 2010); tendo em vista esse corpo enquanto objeto de desejo, lugar de resistência, fronteira cultural e étnica, ou mesmo enquanto vestígio de história e memória. Por meio de articulações teóricas, estéticas e políticas sobre essas imagens, e da análise desses filmes, buscaremos entender de que forma o cinema intercultural – capaz de criar novas imagens a partir da memória dos sentidos, pois possui qualidades táteis e contagiantes, com as quais o espectador se confronta como se estivesse se relacionado com um outro corpo (Marks, 2000) – se faz dispositivo de representação de uma possível história cultural e memória, precisamente por meio do papel que os corpos, deslocados de suas paisagens de origem, atuam para a construção dessa história e memória culturais.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Cinema; corpo; interculturalidade; memória; pós-colonialismo; representação

CHOCOLAT AND BLACK VENUS: BODY, IDENTITY AND MEMORY

Both *Chocolat* and *Black Venus* are films structured by flashbacks¹. While in the first we have a flashback centered on the main character's memories, France, after she comes back from Africa, where she has lived her childhood with her parents – memories that coincide with Claire Denis's own, giving the movie a strong autobiographical aspect –, in the second, we notice a flashback of a more historical aspect that, although biographical – and in a more evident way, using concrete data about Saartjie Baartman's life –, does not emerge from the main character's memories but from a collective memory. For Laura Mars (2000), it is proper to the intercultural cinema the use of individuals' stories that serves in reality to represent collective stories. In other words, we want to comprehend Baartman's and France's stories as images able to complement, to continue or to fulfill in some level the recomposition of the stories of domination and colonialism that preceded these individual characters and that probably will succeed them.

It is important to distinguish by which point of view we want to think these images. Clearly, it's not a question of which image is the "true" one, but which one has the most persistent representation, and which representation maintains a continuity with the layer of images that preceded it (Marks, 200, p. 41). In *Chocolat*, France, an adult woman, after the experience of living in France – and of being different in France, in a distinct way than that way she was perceived as being different in Cameroon –, she recomposes images of the African colonization and of the relations maintained between colonizers and colonized people, through the point of view of a French woman, Claire Denis, who shares with the main character, France, these memories. In Kechiche's movie, the subject of memory is an rereading of historical facts about the same African colonization history, making a point for a kind of false emancipation – once Saartje is a free black woman who decides (based on the free-will principle) to go with her boss, as a business partner, to present varieties in England –, according to a *beur* moviemaker's view that shares, at least collectively, these historical memories.

It is necessary to recognize, and this is evident in these movies, that the "myth of the Occident" and the "myth of the Orient" constitute the two faces of the same colonial sign" (Stam & Shohat, 2006, p. 40). The certainty about this inseparable bond promotes an inexorable – but obviously obsolete in academic circles –, duality that conceives the antagonistic subjects: the I and the Other. Finally, what matters to us, from the analysis of these images, are the concepts of race and racism because, according to Robert Stam and Ella Shohat, racism is a type of discourse and also a practice:

racism is the attempt to stigmatize the different with the purpose to justify unfair advantages or power abuse (...); it is not every group that holds the necessary power to practice racism, in other words, to translate a prejudiced attitude in social oppression. (Stam & Shohat, 2006, p. 51)

¹ Russel Kilbourn (2010) develops his thinking on cinema claiming films are a kind of memory dispositive, understanding flashback as a representational tool to build memory inside cinematographic universe. In effect, flashback is often used in stories which plot is structured in a character seeking trace elements of memory, facts and events from the past or a past time he was told about, or even a collective and historical past.

In addition, the causes of racism are all at once economic, psychological and discursive, being expressed by each one of these fields in different ways, although complementary. Stuart Hall (2003) works out an important debate regarding the terms of “race” and “ethnicity”, evidencing how the discourse about these categories is related to the typical twentieth century’s concept of multiculturalism and how it is socially and politically appropriated. Hall (2003) claims that racism operates, inside the discursive practice, by the means of its own logic, once it validates itself through what is not proper to the term “race”, a word often related to scientific, biologic and natural meanings. As a result, racial distinctions still existed in the first half of the twentieth century to justify, above all, the relations of material and symbolic domination. In short, they justified social hierarchies that supported dominant classes.

CINEMA AND REPRESENTATION

In order to think the modes of representation of these characters in both movies, all of them marked by the history of racial discrimination, we think it’s necessary to assume, even though minimally, that “races” do exist in different people’s imaginaries and that, in a certain way, they managed to survive to its scientific invalidation. In other words, “race” is nothing else but an imaginary category that makes sense in a historical context as well as notions of nation and gender (Ndiaye, 2008, p. 33), and, as consequence, it ends up reinforcing a valid category of social analysis endowed with meanings attributed by sociopolitical circumstances.

According to Ndiaye (2008), as well to Hall (2003), another kind of identity’s possibility is based on the mention of an ethnical origin. Ethnicity, unlike “race”, hardly could be recognized – even superficially – at a first sight. On the other hand, racism can be unveiled in different records of identity combinations based on the ethnicity. A French-Senegalese, for instance, may have his identity questioned for reasons of resembling a French citizen, that is, he will often have his identity subject to police scrutiny, even if he was born in France and identifies as a French citizen, for the simple reason that being both French and Senegalese might seem contradictory in many people’s view. Nevertheless, the reverse, evidently, is also possible. As it happens, for instance, in the case of Manuel, one of *Chocolat* film’s characters and Marie Vial’s son, born in Africa by French parents. He is not just treated as stranger because of his white skin and blond hair – and there are other factors that reinforce this kind of attitude, as we shall see below – as also the African black people regard these traits as bad omen.

The features characteristic of ethnicity in one hand conveyed by cultural means, are associated in the other to biological process conveyed genetically, crossing generation to generation. In this sense, discourses based on “race” and “ethnicity” mix them up, without, however, confusing themselves, and are both present in each other breeding associations that often lead to racist discourse and prejudice. Discourses of biological and cultural distinctions run mostly together. In short, we claim that “racism” and “cultural distinction” support mutually each other entailing “two logics” (Stam & Shohat, 2006, p. 71) in a same cumulative agency.

Both in *Black Venus* and in *Chocolat*, we notice how the character's representation crosses these questions related to identity, including characters that lead them to screen by questioning their own identity in an attempt to make up or to idealize an identity later chosen.

BLACK VENUS: THE POST-COLONIAL BODY AND MEMORY

Saartjie Baartman (Yahima Torres), the main character from *Black Venus*, is a young Hottentot who comes to Europe with her former owner (who in his turn offers her a partnership in exchange) in an attempt to manage life working in the variety theatre. She often seems to be questioning her identity when she subverts, for instance, certain attitudes in such a way she ends up shocking those who are around her expecting from her a proper behavior.

Kechiche seems to divide his very long-running movie (it counts 2h43min) in three stages, each one directly connected to Baartman's impressions about herself and the world (mostly European world): she arrives in England to perform variety shows in decadent theaters. Then she goes to France to make presentations at the *salons libertins* in Paris, right away just after the court puts in doubt her freedom in a trial. The third stage marks the end of the shows when she comes to prostitution in a degradation process that culminates with the donation of her body to scientific research purposes, a donation that comes with a financial quid pro quo, and finally she deceases by sickness. Throughout each one of these stages, Kechiche utilizes visual and aesthetical elements with the purpose of promoting a critical dimension denouncing these atrocities as well as it conducts the spectator and their limits to the point of intolerable in face of human horror, furthermore criticizing society and its capacity of discriminating and stigmatizing the different.

Based on historical events of the beginning of the nineteenth century, Kechiche's film begins with a flashback: a sculpture exhibition from Baartman's dead body in an anatomy class from the Royal Academic of Medicine, in 1815. Nevertheless, behind the interest in studying a very simple human body, it is the attempt to conclude subscribed by scientific authority that this particular one is not human, but a simian body. A group of very concentrated anatomy professors and disciples look at the Hottentot woman body, as well they prospect her vulva and vagina excised and conserved in formalin. The whole speech pronounced by Cuvier, famous scientist from the beginning of nineteenth century², manages the attempt to prove that Saartije is not a person, that she does not belong to human race. In other words, he incurs in the attempt to determine not just her identity as distant from the European civilization but as a different race from the whole human species.

In the beginning of nineteenth century, the thesis of Oriental backwardness, degeneracy and inequality toward the West were very easily associated

² The *Zoos humains et exhibitions coloniales* work, edited in 2002, evokes these anthropological studies occurred throughout XIX century that contributed to classify all the whole humanity in terms of race, legitimizing thus the colonial project and its hegemonic claims.

with ideas about the biological basis of racial inequality. The classifications found in *Le règne animal*, by Cuvier, *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines*, by Gobineau, and *The Dark Races of Man*, by Robert Knox, met a solicitous partner in latent Orientalism. (Said, 2007, p. 280)

Kechiche uses foreground shots from Baartman's body statuette and from the professors and the students, in an attempt to approach the viewer to the characters' conscientiousness. The whole scene teases a strong sense of mental tension. As the camera goes by slowly revealing people's faces, their anguish and their uncertainty are also revealed, causing discomfort – mostly to us 21st century spectators. By insistently showing Baartman's genitalia, the film introduces us since the first moment to a will of reporting the obscenity beyond its sexual connotation, and it goes from the Royal Academic of Medicine to the prostitution streets of Paris. Throughout this fragmented study of Baartman's body, the author opposes and at the same time approaches the types of racisms that are set up both in cultural and biological bases.

After this disturbing scene, the film leads us to the year when Baartman first arrived in Europe. Saartje Baartman dreams of being a singer and dancer artist. The young woman exhibits her caged body in a street theater at London. There we find diversified variety shows, such as a fire spitter man, a chain breaker, a wild beavers tamer, acrobats and finally a “wild female sample from African continent” (*Black Venus*, 2010). A European descendant man called Caezar (Andre Jacobs) is her partner; he dresses a tamer's outfit and he announces to the London public the new show presenting a wild beast that he himself, as he claims, captured in African forest. A jaguar skin covers the cage and Caezar menaces to take it away in order to make everybody see the wild African woman. One more time and at throughout the whole film, Kechiche utilizes the foreground shot in order to approach the spectator, making him, as says Jean Epstein, to penetrate the scene: “between the show and the spectator, no stage. We do not contemplate life. We penetrate it. This penetration allows all intimacies” (quoted in Martin, 2013, p. 41). To Mrabet, the use of this approaching camera allows the author to be as closer as possible to the character and enables him to cast a more “human” and painful sight over the *Black Venus* (Mrabet, 2014, p. 128).

Just inside the cage, we find Baartman held up by the hands on the floor, sometimes closer to it, just like an animal, in contrast with human upright position. Baartman does not appear completely erect to the public in any occasion of these shows. Kechiche manages to emphasize Baartman's suffering and pain mostly because her hard posture towards the show's long duration, an extremely uncomfortable position to a human being. This condition obviously contrasts directly with her wish for a better life in Europe, the desire of living as an artist that took her to this continent. However, racial prejudices imposed to her, sanctioned by a colonialist discourse, keep her far away from her (still colonized) motherland under the same oppressive condition.

Baartman and Caezar's show sounds like circus staging. We often find Caezar inciting the public to yell out. Everybody looks like anxious to see the “beast”: men, women,

and sometimes even children. When Caesar discovers the cage, we find a black woman with very large hips and very thick thighs. She starts dancing and singing. Encouraged by the “tamer”, spectators yell more and more. It is a very sad and profound portrait of colonialism, a system that dehumanizes both colonizers and colonized people. The European that tames the African. The last one, in his turn, represents the black people and they are dressed in a few clothes; they communicate themselves in dialect, oppressed by the whip and by their own incapacity of acting inside the dominant system. Then, in front of the unknown (once Baartman is not recognized even as human being), emotions felt by the public oscillate from estrangement to fear.

Black Venus' story portrays, and evidently denounces, an important moment from the end of the 18th century to the beginning of 19th century when the so called “exotic people”, the “salvages”, migrated to Europe to end up at circus stages in exhibition' shows.

African and Asian groups of people were exhibited as human figures related to specific animal species; the words “native” and “animal” – elliptical colonialist taming words – were taken literally, and the very exhibition of caged people already suggested that they were individuals below the human level. (Stam & Shohat, 2006, p. 156)

These spectacles, as we can see in the film, used to get attention even of young and children. The canonic image of the European man was the model used to marginalize everything that was not analogue to him. In this sense, Kechiche invites us to revisit the oppression story in which all the hegemonic white and racial policy had have its support, justified with scientific and allegedly logical arguments. Yet, as claimed Kechiche in interview: “I did not tell Baartman' story to incriminate past times, but to better understand the present” (quoted in Mrabet, 2014, pp. 126-127).

At a certain point in the performance, Caesar urges Venus to parade as a “European lady”, with the only intention of making the public laugh of her gaudy gait. That is an act staged by Saartije, who obviously walks like any other woman when she is not on the stage, but as doing so Caesar and public end up casting her far away from any possibility of being recognized as human or even as woman. A climax marks the end of the show, when Venus, appearing backwards to the public, shows her buttocks, which are palpated, pinched and rarely smoothed by the avid men. People astonishingly go into trance by touching, pinching or smoothing her body. In the other hand, she feels harassed, sometimes reacting with small gestures that are soon reprehended by Caesar. At Baartman's face, what people cannot see is disappointment, sadness and pain.

We can easily notice curiosity and desire for the different other as well as apprehension and fear. They want to possess and dominate the different but assured of not being surprised, of not being molested and come out unscathed from this contact experience. Because of that the tamer is present at stage, in order to mediate this coexistence and stage it in safety. This scene seems not having an end, not only because its long plans, but also the emotions that Kechiche's camera draws: Baartman's sadness, Caesar's enthusiasm, spectators' fear and desire. The camera often shows a 360° panorama to make

us see public and stage sharing the violent scene into which the dominant glorifies the subjugation of the dominated ones.

Borrowing Slavoj Žižek's ideas (2009, p. 56) on violence issue, the philosopher notices that fearing the outsider by "me" is constituted by social and political features in order to raise, on a global level, an imaginary but extremely regarded and rarely exceeded boundaries between different peoples. Otherwise, on a local level, also to trace boundaries between distinct classes. We can realize, for instance, how Kechiche's film "maintains" both London and African spectators at the "places" they belong to given by society, that means they act exactly how we expect they do.

In Kechiche's film, people construct their plot just around these boundaries. Professor and Scientist's discourse as well as Baartman's trial in an English court are carefully constructed scenes that manage to reinforce the broad influence of Eurocentric thinking. Therefore, we can say that, from this trial, Kechiche approaches film's main issue, namely that of human dignity. Trial's process then imposes a double questioning: whether is Baartman conniving to her situation or is she just enacting? (Mrabet, 2014, p. 128).

The trial chapter is central to the narrative. Kechiche uses it to cast the questioning on the limits between reality and enacting and the borders between true and false. It is interesting to notice how, in the court, Saartije does not speak by herself, but an interpreter mediates her speeches. Because of the very desire to stay in Europe and be an artist – and because she doesn't realize in time the unreachable of her dreams –, Saartije ends up reaffirming Caesar's way of thinking when he defends the shows by arguing that spectators are mixing up representation with reality. Charged by members of the African league of human exploitation and attack on dignity, Caesar simply replies justifying that Saartije is a properly hired and well-paid free woman.

And yet, Kechiche launch us at the same trap where Saartije is prisoned. If on one hand, we see Saartije as a woman dressed in European fashion, claiming her place to be an artist behind Caesar, on the other, we end up realizing her submission to Caesar's rules even if she does not agree with the bad show's features. At the same time, we also realize that her physical and emotional integrity is surely threatened: "they can see, but not touching me; I am not a harlot; it didn't happen as you have promised me" (*Black Venus*, 2010), she says to Caesar at backstage. Despite the trial's favorable outcome to Caesar, the case repercussion troubles Saartije making her think the possibility to join Réaux's group show in order to make shows in France.

As a result, movie's story gets in the second stage, starting with Baartman's baptism, the moment when she receives the Catholic name of Sarah and after that the shows at the *salons libertins* of Paris. Réaux appears followed by Jeanne, a prostitute that goes along Saartije and Caesar in this travel. Despite Caesar have claimed in court that Saartije was a free woman, Réaux pays him to see the so-called Venus' genitalia. And still, in France, performance style changes a bit. Replacing the previous fur clothes, Saartije wears now red skinny dresses in order to outline her body curves. Besides, Jeanne's presence reinforces the opposition between Saartije and European women: a "wild", "misshapen" black body in contrast to white well-dressed bodies.

In the same sense, space and atmosphere change themselves, replacing the previous varieties' decadent theaters by luxurious lounges where people are well dressed and drink champagne. The repeated Kechiche's sequence-shots reaffirm suffering and anguish experienced by the main character, who is used and abused as sexual object more than ever at this stage point by her partner, but also by Jeanne, men and women at the shows; "touching her turns them fertile" (*Black Venus*, 2010), says Jeanne during a performance, referring to Baartman's genitalia. Réaux invites the present ones to ride and tame the Venus before stimulating her genitalia. Finally, Kechiche puts us to confront the intolerable part of human nature enacting a *mise-en-scène*, as claims Mrabet, which reveals what turns so funny these shows to the spectators, that is, Baartman's humiliation, arranging this humiliation as the very source of pleasure.

Paris' chapter presents another relevant plot: the presence of a journalist who wants to do an interview with Baartman. It happens in a brief sequence inside a coach and all the sequence reinforces nonetheless the Western ideas about broad people from the Orient. Baartman's story, as she tells him, is not alike that the journalist had imagined. He gets surprised when she tells him she worked at Caesar's family house: "you were not a princess, you were just a housekeeper!" (*Black Venus*, 2010) he replies. Then, he tries to retrieve any fact in the Venus' story corresponding to the Western thinking on the Orient asking her whether her family had been decimated or massacred by white ones, to which she gives a negative answer. As a result, he has nothing left but to cast off: "may I write you were a princess? It will be more beautiful to the women readers" (*Black Venus*, 2010). Responding to that, a visible tired and downcast Baartman nods affirmatively.

Sensuality, promise, terror, sublime, idyllic pleasure, intense energy: the Orient as a figure in the pre-Romanesque and pre-technical Orientalist imagination of Europe in the late eighteenth century actually had a chameleonic quality called (adjectivally) "oriental". (Said, 2007, p. 173)

Film's third moment marks the presence of scientific committee interested in examining Baartman's body, but it also marks the end of the spectacles and the consequent character's arrival in a brothel. From now on, Kechiche conducts the spectacle to the very demise of Baartman. Turned into an alcoholic, she shows an increasingly more tired and hopeless sad face. First Caesar and then Réaux have sold Baartman assigning contracts just as if she was a slave, which evidences, one more time, the unconformity between speech and facts. In one of her last shows, spectators bother themselves with the violence used by Réaux to treat the Venus: "she is crying; it's not funny anymore; leave her alone". Réaux responds to the public by saying that "they are tears of joy and pleasure" (*Black Venus*, 2010). If Saartije could control her own body, and also enjoy it, in a few precious moments, from the last shows on this female black African body is now turned into a petty curiosity object to the senses of sex and pleasure and meanings of science purposes.

Saartije crushes into the worst humiliations when analyzed by the scientific committee (Mrabet, 2014, p. 128). They observe and analyze her indecently treating her like

an animal. Among the scientists, there is the noteworthy presence of a man in contrast with the violent majoritarian individuals of the film; we find out that he is the only one to retrieve Baartman's dignity by painting her femininity, her beauty and above all her essential humanity. After Baartman's death by syphilis in Paris streets³, Réaux looks after the scientific committee, to whom he now can sell her body. In consequence, Cuvier will finally see and prove the "hottentot apron", the Venus genitalia, which she had not showed under any circumstance to the committee when she was alive. In effect, this is how the film closes its cycle, returning to where it had started. Kechiche then questions science role and its hierarchical meanings of inferiority and superiority necessary to race speeches.

Kechiche seeks in all his films to evidence questions towards human dignity and the brutality of social reality; however, these questionings are even more vehement because of its true historical background in *Black Venus*, and so because of the images' power that it imposes to us. If in a first sight Saartije is presented as a caged animal in front of Caesar's spectators, later, she turns into object of sexual excitement at the *salons libertins* and then treated not surprisingly as both a sexual object and a caged animal by the scientific committee. Scientific committee is far from recognize her humanity and will reduce her in a definitive way due its verifier capacity of legitimizing often regarded as the most important authority of knowledge by European citizens.

Film makes clear the Western attempt of legitimizing through race distinction speeches incurred by science that divide upper races and lower races, disseminating them as "universal truth" to the broad world. As it is known, to the collective (un)consciousness the term "oriental" (referring African and Asian people) has always reminded ideas like those about sensual and insatiable women, exoticism, despotism tendencies, unfamiliarity with enlightened culture, reduced intellectual capacity, backwardness, mysticism, allegory, terrorism and so on. For Western people, if the oriental one is part of subjected race as the scientists tried to prove in different moments (as the movie also approaches it), the oriental one must be him too subdued (Said, 2007, p. 281).

During the anatomic study process, a plaster model of the Black Venus replaces Baartman's genitalia, brain and other parts of body. Kechiche interchanges both moment of the reconstitution in details and the destruction of the Venus body. It functions as the very reconstruction of an image. That Venus princess that Baartman once desired so much to be... This long silent sequence reveals one more time the cautious and careful gestures of the scientist who had painted Saartije, in contrast once again to the violence of his pairs. This brief post-mortem epilogue concludes with the opening sequence at the amphitheater. Kechiche thus seems to express by ending this cycle that we could not or at least should not isolate the past from the present tense.

³ Born in South Africa in 1789, Baartman, Saartije dies in 1815 at the age of 26, in Paris. Baartman's remains were exhibited in Paris Natural History Museum until 1974, 159 years after her death. They were returned to her motherland only in 1994, at the request of Nelson Mandela, receiving its properly funeral just in 2002 (almost two centuries after her death).

CHOCOLAT: MEMORY AND IDENTITY IN COLONIAL LANDSCAPES

In this sense, we can follow the same track thinking on *Chocolat* Claire Denis' film. *Chocolat* has a strong biographical characteristic regarding past and present tenses throughout both main character's memory and historical collective memory as it regards to the presence of French colonizers in African countries. Just like *Black Venus*, a flashback too structures *Chocolat* intriguingly linking France's memory to sequences and events from the past in which moments she was not present in fact. In other words, her memory mixes up itself to a post-memory later built by the character – throughout all her life after returning to France, for instance – or even to Protée's memory (played by Isaac de Bankolé), a house servant, known as a “boy”, who has him too an important role in France's childhood.

According to Claire Denis, this film was partially inspired by the novel *Une vie de boy* (1956), by a Cameroon writer Ferdinand Oyono's, which tells the story of Toundi, who becomes a “boy” and nevertheless aware of arbitrariness and colonialism power through his relationship with the white people living at the house where he works⁴. Protée and Toundi have similarities mostly concerning their relationship with the patrons, as often they broke with the so expected obedience and reification criticizing their conditions or assuming a reactive position before them. In short, Protée and France share memories that go back to that period in Africa and, even though narrative takes its place in her female point of view, Protée's view and memory are present particularly in sequences France is not there. Nevertheless, they are mixed up with France's childhood memories and the memories she builds in the adulthood when she decides to revisit Africa in order to retrieve the past or at least to fill in its gaps.

“The Orient was practically an European invention and had been since antiquity a place of Romanesque episodes, exotic beings, enchanted memories and landscapes, extraordinary experiences” (Said, 2007, p. 27). These remained memories, enchanted landscapes and exoticism introduce the opening of Denis' film. There is a beautiful beach where we can see a man and a child playing in the sea. Their black bodies shine under the sun. After they go off screen, camera's view turns itself to a supposed viewer, a white French woman, that is France. She looks at the black man not with curiosity, but with desire. With this brief information about the characters spectator rapidly presumes that they are the “exotic beings” inhabiting that “enchanted landscape”, and that the woman is probably an European tourist in search of “extraordinary experiences” or even a “Romanesque episode”. Camera's sight also shows child and man lying on the dark sand, sensing the sea waves touching their bodies. As she watches them, she cleans her white feet at the dark sand and then goes away walking towards the road.

After that, the man she was watching passes by her driving a car; as he sees her walking the road, he offers a ride. After that we find out he is in reality an expatriate American

⁴ *Une vie de boy*, by Ferdinand Oyono, has become a African literature classic romance written in French. It has been written with Toundi's memories found in his journal, which describes the settlers as trivial and hypocrite people. It is an interesting book because it reverses the structure power of colonialism turning the white ones into curiosity objects for the colonized people (Mayne, 2005, p. 35).

who was born in Africa and was just sent back there, while she is in fact a French woman who lived all her childhood and adolescence in the African continent. Using this small subversion of commonly known stereotypes, surprising spectator's expectations, Claire Denis makes a point of certain questions regarding otherness: who is the different other, to whom can one be the different and what makes one be perceived as different.

Inside the car, France keeps on watching through the windows the landscape that begins to merge into another landscape, nevertheless not so different from the previous one. Now settled in other landscape, we see a pickup truck and a little girl along a young black man. The little girl watches the landscape passing by. The same landscape as the previous one. That is, the landscape in the background of the route between Limbe and Douala (Cameroon coastal cities). Girl and black man look at opposite directions, although we can perceive an evident complicity between them, and yet it goes just like if their worlds could not mix in one another or if the future glimpsed through their eyes led them to opposite paths. We are henceforward contemplating France's memory.

France's desire or even her necessity to come back to Africa in order to live these childhood's memories regards to the search of her identity and mostly the search of a place to belong.

If on one hand, none of us is outsider or beyond geography, on the other, none of us is also totally absent from the struggle for geography. This struggle is complex and interesting because it is not restricted to soldiers and cannons, but also encompasses ideas, forms, images and representations.
(Said, 2007, pp. 39-40)

France's return home points out a claiming for her childhood and youth's place, a place to belong and which belongs to her although partially. She needs this place to become adult, however, the claiming for a place brings a whole range of memories which is not restricted to a physical spaces' reconstruction (her home, her mother's vegetable garden, the landscape), but includes affective memories and feelings experienced at these spaces. In this sense, the struggle for the space will never be individual, but collective mostly because if there is a need to fight it is because space is always being in dispute, in other words, because there are at least two individual ones claiming a certain space.

In *Chocolat*, mainly France and Protée's characters represent this problem by showing the duality of space dispute and sharing. Since beginning to the end of film, black and white bodies will be presented in scene disputing that geography. However, if on one hand France needs conquest daily the space where she lives, that is nature and local people, on the other hand – and that is much more evident when France gets adult – she feels like if she belonged to another place. Speaking of her childhood in Africa, Claire Denis describes in a 2002 interview to Thierry Jousse the African continent as the land where she lived and love so much, but not as her true home:

my father was a colonial functionary, so I knew I was passing through. I didn't lose my country, because I knew it never belonged to me. Nothing

belonged to us... I belonged to a country – France – that I knew nothing about. (quoted in Mayne, 2005, pp. 10-11)

It is evident both in Denis' movie and in her words that she understands the colonialist system as a system that does not allow relationships that stimulate brotherhood feelings (to local inhabitants) and belonging feelings (to the local). Colonial basis rests in a domination system and its entire established links are based on oppression. Colonial domination over native peoples made part of a solid historical global movement that reached its apogee at the beginning of twentieth century, which was supported by the aesthetical and scientific control of nature (through classification schemes), capitalist appropriation of resources and imperialist organization of Earth planet under a panoptical regime (Stam & Shohat, 2006, p. 141). In this sense, it is not difficult to see how colonialist control over all the fields of human organization, not just economic and territorial, which are the more evident, but not the most important. In point of fact, there is not such importance hierarchy concerning these colonial systems of control, because what is important is the very control itself practiced over all native life aspects.

According to Hall, Gramsci claims, for instance, a difference between a class that “dominates” and another that “rules” (Hall, 2003, p. 314). This way of understanding such a difference interests us mostly because offers us tools to better understand France's father in narrative, an official head of district subdivision called Marc Dalens. Dalens is a very gentle-looking man who normally talks in a soft-speaking voice, he seems to integrate in some way the local people mostly when compared to others European citizens showed in the film. He likes to watch men and nature and make drawings of them in a notebook he always carries with him. Dalens' authority and the power he performs over local people are connected to the “direction” concept developed by Gramsci and resumed by Hall. In other words,

mastery and coercion can keep authority of a particular class over society. But their “reach” is limited. It has to continually appeal to coercive means rather than gaining support. For that reason, it cannot advance positive participation of different sectors of society in a historical project of state transformation or society renewal. On the other hand, the “ruling has a similar “coercive” characteristic. But it is “driven” by the achievement of consent, regarding subordinate interests, and by the attempt of becoming popular. (Hall, 2003, pp. 314-315)

Dalens seems to please everyone both natives and foreigners who get in his domain areas. He is not ingenious. He knows the tamer role he plays there and even the unsustainability of French domination: “one day we're all going to be kicked out of here” (*Chocolat*, 1998), he claims. One of his functions to which he was designated is to build roads, and it stands analogously to his relationship with people. Because Dalens is the one who stands these “communicational roads” between the characters. He mediates almost all relations, that is, he is responsible to drive the colonial process. Being conscious

of his allocation, Dalens easily settles down his role as a ruler, turning into the very different others the natives from the North Cameroon in their own motherland.

Dalens' wife and France's mother Aimée also plays her part as the official lady. Although she feels clearly displaced and unsatisfied, she gives orders to employees, decides what to eat and welcomes houseguests. Aimée usually takes a rest after lunch (she does the *siesta*) as it is a cultural habit. This is the only moments she feels able to "escape" the manor. She sneaks out through a window and runs to a kind of "slave quarter", where black men and women are busy with their daily affairs. One of these women speaks with France: "aren't you taking a rest? You're going to see, you will be black, and your father will yell to you!" (*Chocolat*, 1998). Facing the impossibility of leading average French lifestyle (France does not go to school, she has any contact with other children with whom she could play), perhaps the white girl would rather the constant movement of slave quarters than the drag of time in the manor.

However, despite being a child, France reproduces her parents' authority and equally the ruling authority given by the colonial system of which she is both an agent and possibly a victim. In one sequence, for instance, France addresses Protée authoritatively when from the table France demands Protée to taste her porridge. He kneels and then she starts to feed him; in a first glance, he looks like a child or a baby, but then her acting makes him seem more like an animal than anything else. When some of the porridge drops on France's hand, Protée licks it like a hungry dog. She laughs to him, though he remains serious. France's way of communicating with Protée is limited to exchange glances and gestures; there are a very few moments when they exchange words between themselves. Parallel to that they seem to share a complicity or a friendship, an uncanny feeling remains dividing their worlds and turning them unable to be in harmony.

Since the beginning, that is, before flashback, both an adult France and a childish France express very few emotions. She smiles rarely, and indeed she is more observant than an active person; it goes like if she watched her life in a faraway distance and something always seemed to escape her sight. Such a position experienced by France seems related to her woman condition in Africa, despite it can be regarded also as a result of Denis' point of view as a woman moviemaker. Still, it is necessary to remind spectators those images they watch are France's memories, who particularly selects them and in a certain way chooses which ones and how she will remind them.

In addition to these characters, Denis brings to the film a range of foreigners who inhabit or are in transit in Africa. They come from different origins and so they are differently related to the continent and its inhabitants. A gentleman from Norway called Hansen, who lives in poor conditions compared to Dalens' family, identifies himself as a "God's soldier" and desires to convert the native ones into Christians; an English man who comes to Dalens manor while he is in travel: Aimée welcomes him and spoils him asking the cooker to prepare English food or deciding to change her dresses when she sees him wearing a smoking at dinner and later dancing with him, even though she manifests an unpleased feeling in welcoming visits during husband's absences. Another foreign character is Segalen, a former seminarian who is crossing Africa on foot and

works on building roads along the natives, and finally a coffee farmer who takes along with him a black maid, whom he feeds like a tamed animal on the bedroom floor and with whom he has sex.

Claire Denis seems to classify and systemize the range of multiple characters that France herself tries to do with her memory retrieving the different “types” of colonizer. In this sense, she isolates her father⁵ and withdraws him from the typical image of colonialist invader and exploiter. However, the various people who come do Dalens’ house actually offer to spectator a perspective over different aspects of colonization, which means that even the colonizer in a certain sense has multiple facets inscribed in different European characters. Each point of view offers a different perspective over Africa but, even so, they do not elide a Eurocentric view.

All these characters represent colonial structures, such as patriarchy, racism, superiority complex of European nations. Perhaps only France as a child could sometimes imagine herself in a different way inside African culture – for instance, she learns to speak some local words from Protée – but she always returns to her original place, realizing the impossibility of a real adjustment. Observing the landscape with his daughter, Dalens explains:

when you look at the mountains, beyond the trees, where earth touches the sky, this is the horizon. The closer you get to this line, the further it moves. If you walk towards it, it moves away. It runs away from you. You see the line. You see it, but it does not exist. (*Chocolat*, 1998)

This horizon line can be a border invisible to the eyes or can be the unsustainable future of colonialist system. At the door entrance of Dalens’ manor, it is enrolled: “this house is the last house of the earth”. A German officer who has lived there wrote this sentence, explains Aimée to the English visitor. She adds that “they say this officer was hanged by one of his *boys*” (*Chocolat*, 1998) and looks at Protée, who in his turn bows his head. Ironically, this officer is buried in a little cemetery next house surroundings. France questions if they will bury her body there too.

France and Protée are two solitary individuals inside this colonialist system that hinders any affective feelings between them. It looks paradoxical because despite they are detached one from the other there is still a kind of intimacy between them. Because they seem in contradiction with their respective colonizer’ and native’s roles, they keep some similarities and, by that, France’ and Protée’s memories mix themselves alluding a colonial collective memory. Despite the patrons show great confidence in Protée, he is treated as simple element operating inside the colonial apparatus.

By rejecting Aimée’ seduction attempt, Protée denies and denounces the usual hyper-sexualized role of black man in films, of native as a property object and the exotic black man as desire object as well. In other words, Protée finally opens wide his consciousness

⁵ Claire Denis claims in a 1996 interview with Mark Reid: “my father was very interested in African culture and spoke many African languages. Politically, he was always in favor of African independence”. Esse homem que descreve a cineasta é muito semelhante ao que representa o personagem Marc Dalens no filme (Reid, 1996, pp. 67-72).

in face of his situation and a desire of rebelling hidden throughout all the film. Finally, Aimée asks Dalens to dismiss Protée, who in his turn takes revenge against little France. In this sense, the profound marks of colonialism end up recorded in France and Protée. When France asks Protée, inside the generator room, whether that machine really burns, he puts his own hand over it and inducts France to do the same gesture. Both gets profoundly burned. Then France casts him a painful and misunderstanding glance.

As a result, France and Protée share the same bruise mark, which means pain and mutilation. These are the bruise marks of colonialism. The hands lines were supposed to be inscribed the future are erased by the burn scar.

Protée's defiant gesture now becomes a powerful (rather than weary) non-verbal comment upon the effects of colonial repression and the attempted erasure of his culture, history and memory. The outer skin burns, erasing any identifying lines or markers, taking the imprint away. In this action Protée gives visible form to what the colonialist presence believes it practices: the erasure of the "Other". (Hayward, 2002, p. 42)

Following this track, if France has returned to Cameroon in order to fill some gaps of memory and to find a place to belong, what she really finds is in fact an absence. Absence of a place, of people from this place. The more she fills some of these gaps with her revisited memory, the more gaps are open by the constant erasing cycle executed by colonialism. Protée's black hand and France's white hand are both burned, marked forever, they represent what connects these bodies in history and, even colonialism tries to erase memory and history of colonized people replacing them by colonizer's culture and history, bodies which pass through one side to the other of the boundaries and are inserted in the same process (both of master and slave), they too guards these inerasable stories. When the American guy who drives France home sees her hands, he claims "I don't see anything in your hands, neither past nor future" (*Chocolat*, 1998), he does not realize that mark, that absence of lines, is itself in one time the past and the future.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In conclusion, we notice both in *Chocolat* and in *Black Venus* a desire to retrieve history following memory's trails, not just characters' memory, neither historical and collective memories, but mostly that one inscribed on the bodies. These bodies represent cultural resistance and desire for breaking the cycle. The different one ceases to be a stereotype forged by history and reinforced by films – which its role of "humanity stories teller adjusted perfectly to the function of conveyer of national and imperialist narratives" (Stam & Shohat, 2006, p. 144) – to assume on the other hand a questioning function of history itself, contributing to the problematic that seeks to revisit colonialism and its consequences.

Translation: Álvaro Brito

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