

Hand in hand? Documentary film and the paradox of a Belgo-Congolese union at Expo 58

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The 1958 World's Fair, held in Brussels and known as Expo 58, was an apotheosis of Belgian colonial cinema and propaganda. Simultaneously, it harboured a paradox at the core of late colonial Belgium. In various ways, Belgium developed a dubious reconstruction of the past in an attempt to uphold a strong connection between metropole and colony in the burgeoning Atomic Age. This article explores how the idea of a Belgo-Congolese union was constructed and represented in documentary films screened at Expo 58, and how discussions about documentary cinema challenged that idea in a complex encounter of politics and poetics. In analysing the inextricable interweaving of ideas and representations, this article employs archival research as well as close reading of film and written texts.

Through its multifaceted approach, this article shows how the paternalistic tone of colonial films *Tokèndé* (Gérard De Boe, 1958), *Main dans la main* (Inforcongo, 1958) and *Pour un monde plus humain* (Georges Baudouin, 1957), and the discourse in which they thrived, ran contrary to the progressive humanism the World's Fair wanted to display. This 'progressist' stance clashed with the global process of decolonisation (including in Congo), which was largely neglected during the World's Fair.

At the 'Rencontres Internationales. Le Cinéma et l'Afrique subsaharienne' conference, held at Expo 58 to evaluate film production about and destined for Africa, the paradoxes of paternalistic colonial filmmaking were very much present. Developments in ethnographic filmmaking, however, challenged the colonial discourse that promoted a one-sided Eurafrikan community and the colonial cinema that advanced this idea. Though not beyond criticism, cineastes-ethnologists Luc de Heusch and Jean Rouch defended a more participatory and reflexive approach to ethnographic filmmaking, expressed in Rouch's *Moi, un noir* (1958). By specifically focusing on a hand in hand metaphor, this article demonstrates how film documentaries created, as well as challenged, the myths that rewrite history.

Keywords: Belgium, Congo, documentary film, colonialism, World's Fair, propaganda

Brussels, 1958. On what appears to be a sunny, cloudless day, two boys walk hand in hand towards the Atomium, the main attraction at the World's Fair. Symbol of Belgium's post-war reconstruction, its shiny metallic surface brims with a future as good as fulfilled [Fig. 1]. Jean-Marie, clearly the shorter of the two boys, is white with blonde hair. Maurice is black with frizzy dark hair. The pretend pals were paired together to visit the Expo 58 Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi Section for the short film *Main dans la main* (1958), made by Inforcongo, the PR agency for the Belgian Ministry of Colonies.



Fig. 1. *Main dans la main* (Marcel Thonnon and Robert Geerts, 1959) © Marcel Thonnon/Collection CINEMATEK – Royal Film Archive of Belgium.

From its offices in Brussels, Inforcongo was heavily involved in the conceptualisation and realisation of Belgian Congo representations at the World's Fair. Successor to the Centre d'information et de documentation du Congo belge et du Ruanda-Urundi, Inforcongo's pro-colonial propaganda included print publications, photos and moving images. For Expo 58, Inforcongo conceived the multimedia installation *Congorama*, which presented a colonialist history of Congo. They also coordinated the cinema programming of the Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi Section, selecting existing films and commissioning new ones. And finally, Inforcongo was involved in organising the conference 'Rencontres Internationales. Le Cinéma et l'Afrique subsaharienne', which set out to evaluate film production about and destined for Africa.

The films Inforcongo and other organisations selected to be screened at the Brussels World's Fair offered a perspective that largely neglected decolonisation movements throughout Africa and, more specifically, Congo's geopolitical role in Belgium's Late Colonialism — omitting, for example, the fact that Congolese uranium, shipped off to the Manhattan Project to be used in nuclear bombs, had catapulted Belgium into the same Atomic Age that was being celebrated at the World's Fair. As Matthew Stanard surmises, '[t]he 1958 World's Fair maintained a tradition of paternalism toward Africans and buttressed a negative image of Africans, all the while without facing up to Belgium's colonial past'.¹

The current article focuses on the paradoxical relationship between this 'tradition of paternalism' and a so-called progressive humanism that was expressed in both the Expo's overarching slogan, 'Balance sheet for a more human world', and in its belief in colonial documentary cinema as a tool to facilitate a fraternal future for Congo and Belgium. This exploration contributes to the intellectual history of the idea of a Belgo-Congolese union. It continues Stanard's argument that Belgian colonial propaganda was a constant process of making and re-creating history,² and it expands upon this line of thought by connecting it with a reflexive turn in the history of documentary and ethnographic cinema.

In order to examine this encounter of politics and poetics, the article focuses on what Daniel Wickberg considers the fundamental historical aspect of the document: 'the way it organizes and conceives of reality', by which he implies that 'the terms of representation are the very substance of history'.³ To address the inextricable interweaving of ideas and representations in both written texts and films, this article employs a multifaceted approach (using textual as well as contextual analysis) built on archival research and consultation of the Belgica Press digital newspaper collection.⁴ By relating formal analysis of selected films to research into the discourse of politicians, event organisers, journalists and filmmakers, this article attempts to bridge the gap in the academic discussion on formalist historiography versus cultural history. To analyse the two-way traffic between ideas and cinema that manifests itself in the selected documentary films, which are mostly propagandistic, it also explores aesthetic as well as cultural spheres in order to, as Lee Grieveson recommends, interpret 'the connections that can be made [between both spheres] and [...] the ways culture functions in texts, just as texts function in culture'.⁵

This complex encounter of politics and poetics unfolds at a moment when common and still uncommon approaches to documentary filmmaking cross paths with traditional ideas and images that are challenged at Expo 58. To explore some of the recurring cycles and shifting evolutions that constitute this history, the current article follows a three-stage structure borrowed from the way the World's Fair presented film. By focusing successive paragraphs on the past, present and future, the 'progressist' teleology omnipresent at Expo 58 is hijacked to interpret the paradox of both the idea of a reciprocal Belgo-Congolese union and a colonial cinema that would advance this idea.

Past, present and future

Film played a substantial role at Expo 58, the first post-war World's Fair, which ran from 17 April to 19 October 1958. The organisers decided on three film festivals over the same six-month span: one for experimental film, one for general contemporary cinema, and a retrospective section that would select the greatest film of all time.⁶ The intention of this festival triad was to examine cinema's future, present and past, respectively. Applying this framework to the audiovisual activities at the Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi Section of Expo 58 demonstrates that the section's film programme, assembled in line with official Belgian colonial policies, presented a vision of the past, present and future relationship between Congo and Belgium that neglected facts on the ground, denied the Congolese any political or artistic agency, and offered supposedly authentic images of Africa that would soon be challenged.

The World's Fair was an apotheosis of Belgian colonial cinema, the culmination of the propaganda efforts of Belgium's late colonial state of the 1940s and 1950s, which, as Matthew Stanard notes, 'sustained a cognitive dissonance embracing past and present colonial abuses and the righteousness of their rule'.⁷ This myopia in both propaganda and politics could not avoid the fact that the Second World War had left colonial empires in crisis, stimulating a process of decolonisation. However, rather than begin a straightforward transition from empire to decolonisation, a myriad of possibilities, including variations on federal and confederal Eurafrican and pan-African constellations, was considered within the British, Dutch and French empires.⁸

This process was fed by a multitude of politicians, activists and writers, among whom were (future) statesmen Kwame Nkrumah, Sukarno, Léopold Senghor, Félix Houphouët-Boigny and Charles de Gaulle. Frank Gerits argues that after the Second World War, Belgian politicians, likewise, wanted to reform their colonial project and create a Eurafrica that connected both continents. This manifested itself in the recommendation to form a Belgo-Congolese union, as put forward by a

Belgian Senate commission that visited Congo in 1947.⁹ To help foster this union, Belgium's ruling class claimed to count on an elite of so-called *évolués* — colonised people who were made to fit a Western bourgeois mould — as a condition for equality. During a visit by the liberal Minister of Colonial Affairs Auguste Buisseret to Stanleyville (currently Kisangani) in November 1954, the politician Patrice Lumumba, one of these *évolués*, wrote two letters to Buisseret in which he pleaded for proper Congolese representation in governing bodies and stressed the importance of forming a 'Belgian-Congolese community, which will forever cement the great work of our great liberator Leopold II'.¹⁰

By 1956, Lumumba displayed a far more sceptical attitude towards a bond between Belgians and Congolese.¹¹ He was not alone in this regard. That same year, on 29 June, a 'Manifesto' published in a special edition of the Catholic journal *Conscience Africaine*, based in Léopoldville (currently Kinshasa), rejected the notion of a Belgo-Congolese community, which the Governor General of Belgian Congo Léo Pétillon (1952–1958) had proposed in a speech at the Conseil de Gouvernement on 17 June. Rather, the manifesto supported a form of gradual independence that journalist and political advisor Jef Van Bilsen had put forward in his *Un plan de trente ans pour l'émancipation politique de l'Afrique belge* (1955–1956), and promoted a 'Congolese nation, consisting of Africans and Europeans'.¹² Later that summer, on 23 August 1956, the ethnically and regionally defined organisation ABAKO (Association des Bakongo pour l'unification, la conservation et l'expansion de la langue kikongo) distanced itself not only from what they considered the 'illusionary' solution of a Belgo-Congolese community, but also refused a gradual transition towards independence.¹³ Instead, the 'Counter-Manifesto' by ABAKO — led by nationalist politician Joseph Kasavubu, who would become the first president of the independent Congo republic (1960 to 1965) — demanded immediate independence for Congo.

While various factions within the Congolese elite were taking a nationalist turn, Pétillon publicly advocated for a 'Belgo-Congolese

community', but 'confessed privately [...] that this was a rhetorical strategy, not a representation of reality'.¹⁴ Although terms such as 'Belgo-Congolese community' and 'Belgo-Congolese union', as used by Pétillon and others, implied a reconfiguration of the unequal relations between coloniser and colonised, they were chiefly intended as propaganda for domestic and foreign use. This tactic appeared to work. As Stanard concludes, officials across the West 'saw the Congo as devoid of nationalist movements, "an oasis of stability" in a rapidly changing world'.¹⁵ This perspective, however, neglected the trajectory of public intellectuals such as Lumumba, who had, within a few years, changed from a (perhaps strategic) discourse that bought into the Leopoldian '*oeuvre civilisatrice*' to pleading for independence and explicitly criticising colonial atrocities, as he did, for example, during his unplanned speech at the independence ceremony of the Republic of the Congo on 30 June 1960.

Remaking the past: the legacy of Leopold II

From the multitude of changing and often conflicting views on the possible future of Belgo-Congolese relations, only the most optimistic official stance was reflected at Expo 58. An integral part of this propaganda was formed by the continuous rehabilitation or even mythologisation of former Belgian king Leopold II. For instance, René Stalin, a photographer working for Inforcongo, took a photograph of about twenty Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi notables who, on a so-called study trip, apparently paid homage to Leopold, half a century after the monarch's privately owned Congo Free State was ceded to the Belgian State. The floral tribute at Leopold's equestrian statue, some 10 kilometres from the Atomium, on the Place du Trône in the centre of Brussels, suggests docile reverence and a reciprocal relationship between colonised and coloniser over many years [Fig. 2]. Stalin's photo is but one document that contributed to the Belgian State's attempt to 'nationalise' the imperial project of Leopold.¹⁶



Fig. 2. Foto René Stalin (Inforcongo), 1958, HP.1958.56.558 © KMMA Tervuren/R. Stalin.

This narrative manifested itself in full vigour at Expo 58. Despite an abundance of evidence of atrocities perpetrated in Congo Free State (already in existence since Leopold's time), the Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi Section at Expo 58 was dominated by the insistence that the monarch — still considered in the 1950s as the '*roi-bâtitseur*' or 'builder king' of the Belgian State — had initiated a colonial project of civilisation that was now all but completed. Anticipating the fifty-year celebration of the so-called union between Belgium and its colony during the World's Fair of 1958, Minister of Colonial Affairs Buisseret recalled, in the pages of the exposition's official monthly magazine *Achtenvijftig*, that the Belgian Congo pavilion at the Brussels World's Fair of 1910 had

welcomed its visitors with a quote from Leopold, cast in bronze: ‘To open to civilization the only part of our globe which it has not yet penetrated, to pierce the darkness which hangs over entire peoples, is, I dare say, a crusade worthy of this century of progress’.¹⁷ This quote actually came from the welcome speech Leopold gave at the Brussels Geographic Conference in 1876, when he openly contended before the international (Western) community that a region in Central Africa of abundant resources should become his own private property. In the late 1950s, during a new era preoccupied with progress, the core of Leopold’s pseudo-philanthropic pretences still fed into Belgian colonial propaganda. With a layer of humanist sugar-coating sweetening the paternalist message, Buisseret connected the violent excavation of resources at the behest of Leopold with the Belgo-Congolese future he saw ahead:

the young Congo [...], the new Congo we are now building, *hand in hand* with the ever-growing black elite, skilled workers, university graduates, working artisans, the solid cement of the future Belgian-Congolese community of which both Belgians and Congolese have understood that it holds the solution to our common problems.¹⁸

The notion of a continuing project of humanitarian advancement (commencing with Leopold II and running through until the fiftieth anniversary) of the so-called unified nation of Belgium and Congo was not the sole reserve of politicians trying to shape Belgium’s colony in their image. It also manifested itself in films. A prime example of this tendency can be found in one of the most screened films at the World’s Fair, *Tokèndé* (1958), by Gérard De Boe. De Boe was a former health officer and pioneer in ‘official colonial cinema’ who had made films and series of photographs for several government agencies such as the Service de l’Information du Gouvernement in Léopoldville before starting his own production company in 1949.¹⁹ He worked on commissioned films in Belgium and (especially) Congo in cooperation with various organisations that formed the pillars of colonial society:

church, state and large-scale enterprises. At Expo 58, some of his older work was shown alongside a dozen new films commissioned by the Institut national pour l'étude agronomique au Congo belge (INEAC). *En 50 ans* (1958), made for the Union minière du Haut-Katanga, celebrated the social service of the Belgian mining company towards its Congolese employees. De Boe's first feature-length film *Tokèndé* was the official selection of the Pavillon des Missions catholiques du Congo belge, where it was screened daily in their cinema. In brimming Cinemascope colours, it paid tribute to seven decades of missionary work in Congo since the days of Leopold II.

To depict the gleaming success of the '*oeuvre civilisatrice*', at least in the eyes of his Catholic financier, De Boe used a striking mirror structure [Fig. 3].



Fig. 3. *Tokèndé* (Gérard De Boe, 1958) © Erven Gérard De Boe/Collection CINEMATEK – Royal Film Archive of Belgium.

The opening scenes, shot in the city of Bruges (passing for its 1890s self), show five nuns embarking on their God-given mission in what was then still the private property of Leopold II. Leaving their homes and families to build churches, schools and to provide health care, the sisters and other colonisers claim to pass on valuable lessons to the indigenous people. The opening images of the nuns with their hands folded piously are echoed in a similar scene, set decades later, in which newly ordained Congolese priests fold their hands as they are sent out to continue the same missionary work white people had been doing. With these mirroring shots, and affirmed by its paternalistic voice-over, *Tokèndé* suggests that the civilisation project has been handed over to the Congolese, who can finalise the mission for themselves now that the Westerners have moulded them in their image. De Boe's historical recreation paid no attention to forced labour or any other of the documented atrocities in Congo. Conversely, it conjures up a morally and aesthetically idealised portrayal that functions as the foundation for a Catholic brotherhood in the making.

The 'light of civilisation' in the Atomic Age

As Francis Ramirez and Christian Rolot have noted, the idea of Belgo-Congolese coexistence only gradually emerged as a theme in films from 1945 onwards, and even then, more often than not, it was employed as a hypothesis or even paradox.²⁰ This idea of a union of people with a common goal of progress is also expressed in the Inforcongo short *Main dans la main*, shot by cameraman Marcel Thonnon. In the opening scene, Congolese voice-over commentator René Bavassa — a journalist who would go on to have a career in international diplomacy after Congo's independence — is adamant about the fraternal destiny that awaits the two boys as they walk towards the Atomium together.²¹ The voice-over (in French), written by Robert Geerts, head of Inforcongo's publishing department, spells it out as follows: 'This exhibition has [...] allowed people from all over the world to get to know each other better, to

become friends like these two children walking hand in hand'.²² The presence of a Congolese protagonist, a Congolese narrator and images of Congolese musicians, scientists and tourists on equal footing with metropolitan Belgians all project a Congo devoid of colonisation, or, in the words of Ramirez and Rolot: 'an already emancipated nation'.²³ As Patricia Van Schuylenbergh has noted, films such as *Main dans la main* were mainly intended as messages of conciliation, friendship and respect with the aim of bringing the Belgian and Congolese communities together in a unified nation.²⁴ In an almost literal representation of Buisseret's statement about 'the new Congo we are now building, hand in hand with the ever-growing black elite', one scene in Inforcongo's short shows a close-up of a black man and a white man shaking hands over a table of books about subjects such as the economy, as if to seal an exchange of knowledge [Fig. 4].²⁵

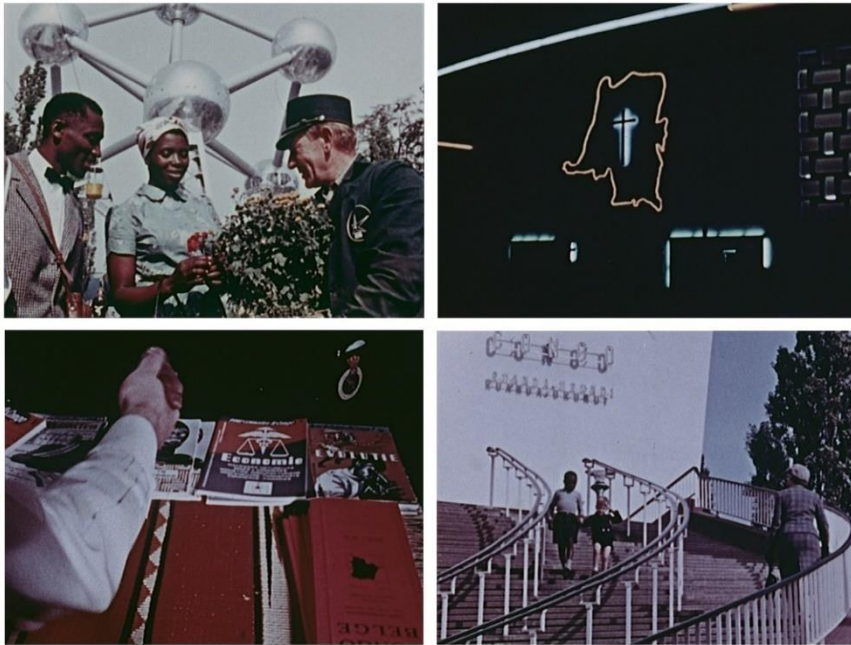


Fig. 4. *Main dans la main* (Marcel Thonnon and Robert Geerts, 1959) © Marcel Thonnon/Collection CINEMATEK – Royal Film Archive of Belgium.

In this way, *Main dans la main* not only tries to affirm the idea of a Belgo-Congolese union via two faux friends strolling around the Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi Section at Expo 58, but it also associates this so-called bond with cultivation of the mind and technological progress. In another staged scene, a young black tourist couple visiting the World's Fair receive flowers from a friendly white gardener while the futuristic Atomium gleams in the background. Another shot shows an electronic map of Congo (which was on display during the evenings at the Expo), with an illuminated cross at its centre, thereby forming a symbolic merger of religious tradition and the new Atomic Age.

The association of the Belgo-Congolese union with technological progress is also strongly emphasised in *Congorama*, a highly popular multimedia installation and pet project of Inforcongo in which 'the story of the Congo, told in 30 minutes' is presented.²⁶ The writer of *Main dans la main*, Robert Geerts, penned its script, while Léon Dubuisson, head of Inforcongo's Ciné-Photo department, oversaw its 'cinematographic documentary research'.²⁷ In a fully automated combination of 'sound, lighting, cinema projectors, scenery, animated maps and lantern slides', Inforcongo wanted *Congorama* to portray 'how [...] the White Man has saved his Black brother from the ferocious grasp of barbarity and slavery, how constant and often heroic efforts have restored him to dignity by bringing him civilisation, health and well-being' and 'how this Crusade of Good against Evil was fought and won'.²⁸

With the aid of state-of-the-art technology, developed by French scientist and cybernetics pioneer Albert Ducrocq, Inforcongo associated ideas dating back to nineteenth-century Leopoldian imperialism with cutting-edge electronic progress. Even more, the automated combination of various audiovisual media was meant to give spectators an experience purported to be authentic, as they would 'relive the principal episodes which brought the Congo out of prehistoric darkness into the light of civilization'.²⁹ Newspaper journalists picked up on *Congorama*'s claim to authenticity. On 8 May 1958, the Belgian, German-language newspaper *Grenz Echo* reported on a visit to *Congorama*: 'From the first moment, the

spectator sees himself transferred to the middle of the heart of the dark continent; he lives in primitive Africa of 100 years ago'.³⁰ Once again, the nationalised narrative of the so-called civilising mission since Leopoldian times was confirmed, in this particular instance aided by innovative technologies through which Inforcongo tried to assert the veracity of their propaganda. Yet, despite its association with scientific credibility and the general progressist stance at Expo 58, the accuracy of Western depictions of Africa was also challenged. No matter how moderately or tentatively, calling into question those images also meant calling into question the nature of Eurafrikan relations.

The future is now: 'Africa is included in the European idea'

Building on a highly debatable reconstruction of the past, Inforcongo tried to uphold the idea of a strong connection in the present between metropole Belgium and its colony. The PR agency even tried to project that relationship into the future, a future they claimed was already within grasp. Apart from associating the Belgo-Congolese union to notions of human progress at the core of Expo 58 via *Congorama* and the short film *Main dans la main*, Inforcongo also collaborated with the Ciné-Photo Group of the Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi Section to organise 'Rencontres Internationales. Le Cinéma et l'Afrique subsaharienne', a conference held from 23 to 26 July 1958, with screenings held at the Palais du Congo belge et du Ruanda-Urundi cinema. Louis van den Berghe was appointed as the president of the Rencontres Internationales and chair of its debates. A doctor of natural sciences and medicine, van den Berghe was the first director of IRSAC (Institut pour la Recherche Scientifique en Afrique Centrale) in Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi, and a scientific counsellor of the prominent colonial documentary *Les seigneurs de la forêt* (Henry Brandt and Heinz Sielman, 1958). At a press conference organised by Inforcongo on 8 July 1958, it was announced that the aim of the Rencontres Internationales

was 'to try to define the means by which cinema can effectively contribute to improving the mutual understanding between Europeans and Africans'.³¹ In his opening remarks at the first working session on 25 July 1958, van den Berghe stated that 'Africa is included in the European idea'.³² Paradoxical as they may have been, these statements essentially aligned with the official standpoint of a Belgo-Congolese union, and put forward film as an appropriate vehicle to help realise this reciprocal relationship in the near future.

Though not necessarily incompatible with these statements, general rapporteur of the *Rencontres Internationales*, Luc de Heusch, who was also present at Inforcongo's press conference, took a more critical (or at least less woolly) stance when he told the official weekly of Expo 58 of the twofold aim of the fora: '1) How can film contribute to the emancipation of Africans? 2) How can film objectively inform European audiences about the problems in Africa?'.³³ De Heusch was a cineaste and ethnologist whose scientific missions to Belgian Congo in 1949 and 1953–1954 had been sponsored by van den Berghe's IRSAC — the latter trip resulting in two ethnographic films: *Fête chez les Hamba* (1955) and *Rwanda: tableaux d'une féodalité pastorale* (1955).³⁴ Anticipating the goals of the *Rencontres Internationales*, de Heusch said that they would debate 'to what extent information and the cultural films shot in Africa have contributed to a correct account of African reality', implying that such veracity had not always been the case.³⁵

When the conference members, after three days of screenings and debates, voted on their final recommendations, their first motion 'note[d] with regret that the image of Africa offered by the global film production is too often inaccurate or distorted'.³⁶ Even though de Heusch's comments and the first motion adopted by all the participants might have indicated that filmmaking in and about Africa was in dire need of self-reflection, the official conference report barely contained any concrete references to what made the image of Africa 'inaccurate or distorted'. Overall, the views — or at least those conveyed in the report — still followed the same paternalistic ideas about Africa and film that

had informed British, French and Belgian colonial policies since the late 1930s. This is hardly surprising given that eight out of eleven speakers at the *Rencontres Internationales* had previously forged careers in colonial cinema.³⁷

The two Belgian speakers at the *Rencontres Internationales*, Alex Van den Heuvel and André Scohy, represented the major institutions involved in Belgian colonial film production: the missionaries and the colonial administration, respectively. In his presentation ‘Convient-il de faire du film pour Africains’, Father Van den Heuvel, a Scheutist who ran the Centre Congolais d’Action Catholique Cinématographique (CCACC) and the production cell Episco-Films in Léopoldville, distinguished between three audience groups in Belgian Congo: *évolués*, *évoluants*, and ‘still primitive’ populations.³⁸ During his talk on the role cinema had played in ‘educating the masses’ since the end of the Second World War (from the viewpoint of the *Gouvernement général du Congo belge*), Scohy referred to the importance of filming local subject matters in a simplified cinematography, without mentioning any need for African filmmakers.³⁹

In earlier publications, Scohy had defended cultural rapprochement between Europeans and Africans, and towards the end of 1950 he had co-founded the *Groupement culturel belge-congolais*, which ‘brings together, in a spirit hostile to all racial discrimination and with respect for every human being, a number of Belgian and Congolese journalists, painters and writers. The group will work to bring Belgians and Congolese closer together on a cultural level’.⁴⁰ As part of this effort, the organisation also started the film club *Cinécole*, with *Groupement* co-founder Albert Mongita, a playwright and artist who also worked for *Radio Congo Belge* in Léopoldville, writing and directing the short film *La leçon de cinéma* (1951).⁴¹

La leçon de cinéma, however, was not part of the international selection of 31 titles — a mix of ethnographic, educational and missionary films — that was intended ‘to make up an evaluation, to analyse the most

contradictory and significant styles and currents of ideas'.⁴² Even more, there was not a single film made by Africans. Besides a couple of brief interventions during the working sessions by guests from Ghana, Nigeria and Belgian Congo (including *Main dans la main* voice-over Bavassa asking filmmakers to not only pay attention to folklore in Africa, but also to 'success stories of modern African life'), there was only one scheduled speaker from Africa: Paulin Vieyra.⁴³ Vieyra was a young filmmaker presented as coming from France, where he had graduated at the reputable Institut des hautes études cinématographiques (IDHEC), but who was actually born in the French colony of Dahomey. 'I would especially like to bring an African perspective here', he said at the outset of his speech.⁴⁴ Even though Vieyra considered the Westerners' concerns about Africans comprehending film 'very touching', he stressed that 'when cinema started in Europe, nobody cared whether people understood the technique'.⁴⁵

In his short film *Afrique sur Seine* (1955), made with Jacques Mélo Kane and Mamadou Sarr, Vieyra reflected upon the situation of young Africans in Paris, and in doing so essentially inverted the common perspective of Western filmmakers exploring the 'Dark Continent' to one of a modern African *flâneur* discovering Paris. Despite Vieyra being invited as one of the speakers at the *Rencontres Internationales*, his film was not selected to be screened, thereby missing an opportunity to showcase a less paternalistic manifestation of the hand in hand metaphor, for one particular scene in *Afrique sur Seine* shows a young black man walking hand in hand on the bustling streets of Paris with his lover, a blonde, white woman. Even though the relations between coloniser and colonised were often phrased in a family idiom, such 'mixed-race' relationships and their uncomplicated depiction were a taboo according to colonialist mores. Yet, as Bambi Ceuppens has stated, apparent fraternalism actually masks a continuing paternalism.⁴⁶ Although the *Rencontres Internationales* showed minor signs of wanting to challenge the reigning discourse of ethnographic documentaries (as suggested by de Heusch's statements of intent and the first motion adopted by the event participants), the general attitude remained inescapably

paternalistic. The practice of film production and curation certainly did not match these intentions, however sparse they were in the light of an overall colonial narrative — thereby perpetuating the paradoxical relationship between a tradition of paternalism and so-called progressive humanism.

From paradox to ‘rude awakening’

The focus of most speakers on the African audience’s incapability to fully grasp film, let alone make films themselves, essentially contradicted any intentions of an equal partnership and rendered obsolete any references to a Belgo-Congolese union or a mutual Eurafrican understanding. A striking example of this paradox can be found in the work and statements of Belgian filmmaker Georges Baudouin, who, in one of his interventions during the debates at the *Rencontres Internationales*, stated that ‘[m]aking [educational] films cannot currently be left to Africans themselves’.⁴⁷ Between 1947 and 1950 Baudouin had contributed to a series of educational films, including *L’éducation de la femme congolaise* (1949), aimed at indigenous people and commissioned by the Service de l’Information du Gouverneur general in Congo.⁴⁸ In the run-up to Expo 58, he had made *Pour un monde plus humain* (1957), a wordless short that announced the World’s Fair and which was mainly created out of archival footage. Beginning with apocalyptic images of war, death and disease from across the globe, Baudouin’s short shows how developments in industry, science, education and communication (apparently all emanating from the West) finally led to global cooperation. This teleological line of human advancement culminates in people from ‘all races’ coming together at the building site of the World’s Fair in Brussels, where they shake hands over a scale model of Expo 58. A close-up of a cordial handshake between a white man and a black man drives home the message: the world is united in progress [Fig. 5].



Fig. 5. *Pour un monde plus humain* (Georges Baudouin, 1957) © Collection CINEMATEK – Royal Film Archive of Belgium.

Yet, while Baudouin's *Pour un monde plus humain* advocated for global equality and used the ubiquitous hand in hand metaphor to express this evolution towards a new and better world, he granted no political or artistic agency to Africans when it actually came to making films.

Given this discrepancy between discourse and practice, it is no accident that the most controversial film at the *Rencontres Internationales* did give (more) agency to Africans. French filmmaker Jean Rouch delivered a speech in which he countered the dominant idea of African inferiority by saying that 'Africans immediately understand the meaning of a good film'.⁴⁹ Under the title 'Treichville', he also presented part of an early

version of *Moi, un noir* (1958), in which he films young Nigerien immigrants who have come to find work in the Treichville quarter of Abidjan, the capital of the Ivory Coast. Following Rouch's own commentary during the film's opening sequence, there is a free-flowing, largely improvised voice-over by Oumarou Ganda and other actors. Situated in a grim urban context, the contact between Europe and Africa in *Moi, un noir* is of a very different nature to what was commonly depicted in colonial films. Here, the hand contact does not consist of a brotherly handshake or a paternalistic blessing. Instead, there is a fistfight between Ganda's character Edward G. Robinson and an Italian who has spent the night with a local prostitute.

Articulating his approach to (ethnographic) filmmaking, Rouch claimed to combine 'filming on the sly' with fictionalised situations, a practice he also observed in de Heusch's films.⁵⁰ Westerners and Africans alike were not always keen on Rouch's ethno-fictional portrayal, however. In his report, de Heusch mentions remarks about the disagreeable nature of *Moi, un noir* and, more generally, the 'dilettantism of ethnography' in its (assumed) ridicule of so-called primitive lives and rituals. This criticism partly anticipates the most famous reproach directed at Rouch by cineaste Ousmane Sembène in 1965 ('You look at us like insects'), as well as the ambivalence Ganda, who would film *Cabascabo* (1968) as a retort to *Moi, un Noir*, felt about his collaboration with Rouch.⁵¹

At the *Rencontres Internationales*, de Heusch defended *Moi, un noir* by denouncing propaganda and (self)censorship: the 'European audience has a right to know all aspects of Africa, the most comforting as well as the most disturbing'.⁵² The trajectory of filmmaking Rouch was exploring stood for 'authentic information [...] the only way to contribute to the birth of a Eurafrikan community in a climate of tolerance and mutual understanding'.⁵³ By filming urban Africa and not only focusing on idealised pastoral settings, and by adopting a more participatory and reflexive stance in an evolution towards what he called 'shared anthropology', Rouch veered off the well-trodden path of (ethnographic) filmmaking.⁵⁴

As Matthias De Groof points out, Rouch's approach to filmmaking can be seen as a response to 'myth-making films' from a Western-centric perspective.⁵⁵ Most films shown at the Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi Section of the 1958 Brussels World's Fair constructed such myths, as was also the case with the idealisation of Belgo-Congolese relations and the mythologisation of Leopold II as a benevolent coloniser. In his 1961 publication for UNESCO on ethnographic and sociological film, de Heusch described *Moi, un noir* as 'the first serious document on the worries, dreams and psychological contradictions of the new African generation'.⁵⁶ The 'authenticity' de Heusch saw in *Moi, un noir*, however, did not align with the authenticity claimed by official colonial cinema. Nor did it match the image Belgian government agencies wanted to uphold about their colonial territories and the country's relationship with Congo. That became clear when *Moi, un noir* appeared on Belgian screens precisely when Belgian and Congolese politicians were discussing Congolese independence at the Round Table Conference in early 1960.

On the eve of a small theatrical release, the film was broadcast on the Dutch-language national television network BRT. The late-night broadcast on Sunday 7 February included an introduction by Omer Grawet and was followed by a debate comprising Grawet and fellow journalists Manu Ruys, François Geudens and Pascal Kapella. On 9 February, Prime Minister Gaston Eyskens wrote to fellow Catholic Party member and Minister of Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi August De Schryver to complain about the 'rather tendentious' interventions of the Belgian guests, who had 'placed the theme of the film into the framework of Belgian Congo'.⁵⁷ Eyskens wanted to know De Schryver's view on this and mentioned that he had already informed Minister of Culture Pierre Harmel (another Catholic Party member) because '[w]ith the Roundtable now in full swing, I wonder if it is not rather inappropriate for television to have similar language'. On 23 February, De Schryver — at the time, fully engaged in the conference on Congo's independence — wrote back to say that he too 'strongly regretted' the tone of the debate that followed

the broadcast of *Moi, un noir*, and that he would contact their colleague Harmel and ‘cautiously gather information’ with Kapella.⁵⁸

No recording of the television broadcast has survived, but in the Catholic film magazine *Film en televisie*, one of its guests, Manu Ruys, described *Moi, un noir* as

an appalling indictment of the responsible colonial system, and also an ominous warning, because this Africa of Jean Rouch is not an act of the imagination; it is today’s reality: the black continent is currently becoming politically independent, vital and rich in children, rich in ambitions, but economically weak and therefore a prey to the highest bidder.⁵⁹

Other journalists also linked *Moi, un noir* with recent events in Belgian Congo and, more generally, with a rude awakening from a propaganda-induced colonial dream. In his review, Catholic journalist Jos. Van Liempt noted that ‘this film does [deviate] very much from what we have so far seen in film footage about Africa. Neither the official information services, nor the wealthy private companies, nor the filmmaking missionaries have ever shown us this image of Africa’.⁶⁰ For Van Liempt, this divergent view of Africa, both in the facts represented and in the manner of representation, ‘[leads] us to the realisation that the work of civilisation has also led to a lot of negative results’.

By 1960, the idea of a Belgian-Congolese union was no longer a realistic hypothesis, and the colonial film production that sought to depict the fraternal bond between metropole and colony — reaching its pinnacle at Expo 58 — had also been relegated to the past. By focusing on the hand in hand metaphor in Belgian colonial films and the discourse in which they thrived, this article has demonstrated that film played a crucial role in creating, as well as challenging, myths that rewrite history in their own image. During the World’s Fair in Brussels, this ‘challenge’ mostly manifested itself in intentions, and less so in the actual practice of producing and curating films. Even though Belgian colonial propaganda

reached an apex at Expo 58, the paternalistic interpretation of a Belgo-Congolese union and the approach to documentary filmmaking as a carrier pigeon for this and adjacent ideas ran into opposition, both in politics and poetics.

Endnotes

¹ Matthew Stanard, “‘Bilan du monde pour un monde plus déshumanisé’: the 1958 Brussels World’s Fair and Belgian Perceptions of the Congo”, *European History Quarterly*, 2 (2005), 267–298 (267).

² Matthew Stanard, *Selling the Congo: A History of European Pro-Empire Propaganda and the Making of Belgian Imperialism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011). Chapter 6 focuses on imperialistic filmmaking in Belgium, with particular attention paid to *Main dans la main* on p. 235–236.

³ Daniel Wickberg, ‘Intellectual History vs. the Social History of Intellectuals’, *Rethinking History*, 3 (2001), 383–395 (390).

⁴ In addition to the film collection of CINEMATEK in Brussels and print sources at the Hendrik Conscience Heritage Library in Antwerp (utilised mainly for the official Expo 58 magazines *Achtenvijftig* and *58. Deze week op de tentoonstelling en in België*) and at the Archives, Patrimoine & Réserve précieuse of the Université libre de Bruxelles (utilised mainly for the booklet edited by Luc de Heusch, *Rapport général du Groupe Ciné-Photo, section du Congo Belge et du Ruanda-Urundi, Exposition Universelle et Internationale de Bruxelles 1958*), the Africa Archive (with its records related to Belgian Congo held at the archives department of the FPS Foreign Affairs and at the State Archives of Belgium) was of particular relevance.

⁵ Lee Grieveson, ‘Woof, Warp, History’, *Cinema Journal*, 1 (2004), 119–126 (124).

⁶ Sergei Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) was selected as the greatest film of all time.

⁷ Matthew Stanard “‘Boom! goes the Congo’: the rhetoric of control and Belgium’s late colonial state”, in *Rhetorics of empire. Languages of colonial conflict after 1900*, ed. by Martin Thomas and Richard Toye (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 121–141 (121).

⁸ For a variety of federal and confederal alternatives discussed within the British, Dutch and French empires, see (respectively): Michael Collins, ‘Decolonisation and the “Federal Moment”’, *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 1 (2013), 21–40; Jennifer L. Foray, ‘A Unified Empire of Equal Parts: The Dutch Commonwealth Schemes of the 1920s–40s’, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 2 (2013), 259–284; Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945–1960*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

⁹ Frank Gerits, *The Ideological Scramble for Africa: How the Pursuit of Anticolonial Modernity Shaped a Postcolonial Order, 1945–1966* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2023), 26.

¹⁰ Lumumba’s two letters and Buisseret’s response ‘that he will submit these various requests to his departments for consideration’ were published in *L’Afrique et le monde* on 9 December 1954. The weekly magazine, founded and ran by Dahomeyan journalist Paul Fabo (1906–1973), was published in Brussels. Quoted from: Jean Omasombo Tshonda and Benoît Verhaegen, ‘Patrice Lumumba. Jeunesse et apprentissage politique, 1925–1956’, *Cahiers africains/Afrika studies*, 33–34 (Tervuren: Institut africain CEDAF; Paris: Editions L’Harmattan, 1998), 220. [My translation, BG]

¹¹ Tshonda and Verhaegen, *Patrice Lumumba*, 191.

¹² ‘Manifeste’, in *Conscience Africaine Numéro Spécial* (July–August 1956), 1. Quoted from: Daniel Tödt and Alex Skinner, *The Lumumba Generation. African Bourgeoisie and Colonial Distinction in the Belgian Congo* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 313. See also: *Le manifeste ‘Conscience africaine’ (1956): Élités congolaises et société coloniale. Regards croisés*, ed. by Nathalie Tousignant (Bruxelles: Presses de l’Université Saint-Louis, 2009).

¹³ Tödt has pointed out that Belgian officials, including Pétillon, were strategically playing off regional, ethnic and social stratifications of Congolese

society to tilt Belgo-Congolese relations in their favour. See: Tödt, *The Lumumba Generation*, 316.

¹⁴ Stanard, 'Boom!', 130.

¹⁵ Stanard, 'Boom!', 124.

¹⁶ Matthew Stanard, *The Leopard, the Lion, and the Cock: Colonial Memories and Monuments in Belgium* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2019), 39–64. See also: Matthew Stanard, 'De koloniale propaganda: het ontwaken van een Belgisch koloniaal bewustzijn?', in *Koloniaal Congo: een geschiedenis in vragen*, ed. by Idesbald Goddeeris, Amandine Lauro and Guy Vanthemsche, (Kalmthout: Polis, 2020), 325–337 (331).

¹⁷ Auguste Buisseret [A. B.], 'Boodschap van Dhr A. Buisseret Minister van Koloniën', *Achtenvijftig*, October 1956, 3–4. English translation quoted from: Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost. A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa*, 1st edn (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 44.

¹⁸ Buisseret, 'Boodschap', 4. [My stress, BG] [My translation, BG].

¹⁹ Patricia Van Schuylenbergh, 'Entre propagande et humanisme: Gérard De Boe, un cinéaste atypique', in *Patrimoine d'Afrique Centrale. Archives Films. Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, 1912–1960*, ed. by Patricia Van Schuylenbergh and Mathieu Zana Aziza Etambala (Tervuren: Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale, 2010), 157–165.

²⁰ Francis Ramirez and Christian Rolot, 'La mixité raciale à travers les films', in *Patrimoine d'Afrique Centrale*, 94–102 (94).

²¹ In late 1959, Bavassa co-founded Congolia, 'a foundation to promote cultural expansion in the Congo', together with fellow Congolese journalists Mwisso-Camus, Pascal Kapella and Joseph Mobutu. Congolia was set up in Brussels, but the founders intended to move their headquarters to Léopoldville. See: [anonymus], 'Courrier africain', *Le Soir*, 15 September 1959, 5. [My translation, BG]

²² *Main dans la main* (Inforcongo, 1958). [My translation, BG]

- ²³ Ramirez and Rolot, 'La mixité raciale', 101. [My translation, BG]
- ²⁴ Patricia Van Schuylenbergh, 'Le Congo belge sur pellicule: ordre et désordres autour d'une décolonisation (ca. 1940– ca. 1960)', *Revue d'Histoire Contemporaine de l'Afrique*, 1 (2021), 16–38 (25).
- ²⁵ Buisseret, 'Boodschap', 4. [My translation, BG]
- ²⁶ Inforcongo, *Inforcongo presents Congorama: the story of the Congo told in 30 minutes*, 1958, n.p.
- ²⁷ Inforcongo, n.p.
- ²⁸ Inforcongo, n.p.
- ²⁹ Inforcongo, n.p.
- ³⁰ Quoted from Stanard, 'Bilan du monde', 272.
- ³¹ [anonymus], 'Inforcongo annonce deux importantes manifestations', *Le Soir*, 9 July 1958, 7. [My translation, BG]
- ³² Luc de Heusch, *Rapport général du Groupe Ciné-Photo, section du Congo Belge et du Ruanda-Urundi, Exposition Universelle et Internationale de Bruxelles 1958*, ed. by Luc de Heusch ([Brussels]: [n. pub.], [1958]), 10.
- ³³ R. Van Leuven, 'De film in Zwart Afrika', 58. *Deze week op de tentoonstelling en in België*, 18 July 1958, 31–34. [My translation, BG]
- ³⁴ Damien Mottier, 'L'oeuvre en double de Luc de Heusch', *Gradhiva* 20 (2014), 218–240 (221, 225). A fragment of De Heusch's *Fête chez les Hamba* was screened during the Rencontres Internationales.
- ³⁵ Van Leuven, 'De film in Zwart Afrika', 31–34. [My translation, BG]
- ³⁶ De Heusch, *Rapport général du Groupe Ciné-Photo*, 4. [My translation, BG]
- ³⁷ Four (former) civil servants of the British Empire were invited to speak about their efforts at producing films for local audiences in British African territories:

C. J. Martin, William Sellers, George Pearson and Victor Gover. The Frenchmen Jean Brérault and Jean Lacour brought a perspective similar to their British peers, but from within the French colonial system. The only speakers who had not had a career in colonial filmmaking in the strict sense were filmmakers Jean Rouch and Paulin Vieyra, and production manager Julien Derode. The latter had been working on two recent Hollywood productions partially shot in Belgian Congo: *The Roots of Heaven* (John Huston, 1958) and *The Nun's Story* (Fred Zinnemann, 1959).

³⁸ Alex Van den Heuvel, 'Convient-il de faire du "Film pour Africains"', in *Rapport général du Groupe Ciné-Photo*, 83–87.

³⁹ André Scohy, 'L'action du Gouvernement Général du Congo belge dans l'éducation des masses par le cinéma', in *Rapport général du Groupe Ciné-Photo*, 76–82. Scohy was a writer with a particular fondness for the arts who had been working for the information services of the Gouvernement général du Congo belge since 1945. (D.D., 'Le Congo dans les livres. L'uele secret', *Le Soir*, 19 April 1955, 5).

⁴⁰ Members of André Cauvin's film expedition were among the guests at the Groupe's first lunch meeting. See: [anonymous], 'Groupe Belgo-Congolaise', *Le Soir*, 23 February 1951, 2. [My translation, BG]

⁴¹ Van Schuylenbergh, 'Le Congo belge sur pellicule', 26.

⁴² De Heusch, 'Introduction au compte-rendu des travaux', in *Rapport général du Groupe Ciné-Photo*, 6. [My translation, BG]

⁴³ De Heusch, 'Compte-rendu des travaux', in *Rapport général du Groupe Ciné-Photo*, 8–31 (25). [My translation, BG]

⁴⁴ Paulin Vieyra, 'Suggestions pour le développement du cinéma en A.O.F.', in De Heusch, *Rapport général du Groupe Ciné-Photo*, 95–97 (95). [My translation, BG]

⁴⁵ Vieyra, 'Suggestions', 95. [My translation, BG]

⁴⁶ Bambi Ceuppens, *Congo made in Flanders?: koloniale Vlaamse visies op 'blank' en 'zwart' in Belgisch Congo* (Gent: Academia Press, 2003), 360.

⁴⁷ De Heusch, 'Compte-rendu des travaux', 20. [My translation, BG]

⁴⁸ Laure Didier, Laetitia Dujardin and Anna Seiderer, '[Catalogue:] L'éducation du femme congolaise', in *Patrimoine d'Afrique Centrale*, 248.

⁴⁹ Jean Rouch, 'L'Africain dans le film ethnographique', in *Rapport général du Groupe Ciné-Photo*, 92–94 (93).

⁵⁰ Rouch, 'L'Africain', 93. [My translation, BG]

⁵¹ Steven Ungar, *Critical Mass. Social Documentary in France from the Silent Era to the New Wave* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 166–167.

⁵² De Heusch, 'Reflections sur les débats', in *Rapport général du Groupe Ciné-Photo*, 103–107 (104). [My translation, BG]

⁵³ De Heusch, 'Reflections sur les débats', 104. [My translation, BG]

⁵⁴ Jean Rouch, *Ciné-ethnography*, ed. and trans. by Steven Feld, *Visible Evidence*, 13 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 18.

⁵⁵ Matthias De Groof, 'Rouch's Reflexive Turn: Indigenous Film as the Outcome of Reflexivity in Ethnographic Film', *Visual Anthropology*, 2 (2013), 109–131.

⁵⁶ Luc de Heusch, *Cinéma et sciences sociales: panorama du film ethnographique et sociologique* (Paris: UNESCO, 1962), 51.

⁵⁷ Brussels, archives department of the FPS Foreign Affairs, Africa Archive, CAB (3761), 350 Films 1958–1960: letter from Gaston Eyskens to Albert de Schrijver, 09/02/1960. [My translation, BG]

⁵⁸ Brussels, archives department of the FPS Foreign Affairs, Africa Archive, CAB (3761), 350 Films 1958–1960: letter from Albert de Schrijver to Gaston Eyskens, 23/02/1960. [My translation, BG]

⁵⁹ Manu Ruys, 'Kanttekeningen bij *Moi, un noir*', in *Film en televisie*, March 1960, 19. [My translation, BG]. Information about the recording of the broadcast from the archive of VRT: email to the author, 11/04/2023.

⁶⁰ Jos Van Liempt [J.V.L.], 'Moi, un noir. Reportage over het Afrikaanse proletariaat', *Gazet van Antwerpen*, 12 February 1960, 7. [My translation, BG]

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