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Spell Reel

Filipa César

Producer Filipa César, Oliver Marbœuf, Maria João Mayer.
Production companies Filipa César (Berlin, Germany), Spectre Productions (Rennes, France), Filmes do Tejo II (Lissabon, Portugal). **Director** Filipa César. **Screenplay** Sana na N'Hada. **Director of photography** Jenny Lou Ziegel. **Editor** Filipa César. **Sound design** Didio Pestana. **Sound** Nikolas Mühe. **Production design** Olivier Marbœuf.

Colour. 96 min. Portuguese, Fula, Guinea-Bissau Creole, English, French.

Premiere February 15, 2017, Berlinale Forum

World sales Spectre Productions

The first image is in black and white, upside down and projected into a black box that then becomes the frame. It now hovers like a time capsule near a man's face. He looks down, listening in on a female guerrilla fighter and translating her words from Fulani. Within the capsule, money is counted and paid out as a new currency, the numbers of the years run backwards in the black box. A 16-mm film glides through the man's hands and is transferred to a laptop screen frame by frame.

Filipa César's *Spell Reel* is the result of a multifaceted research and digitisation project that she initiated in 2011 with Sana na N'Hada and Flora Gomes. Having studied film in Cuba, the two began using the camera to observe the fight for independence in Guinea-Bissau (1963–74). After the decaying visual and audio material was digitised in Berlin, the filmmakers travelled with a mobile cinema to the places where the footage had originally been shot and showed it to audiences for the first time, adding their own commentary. They then moved on, also returning to Berlin. *Spell Reel* watches an archive at work to produce the present.

Stefanie Schulte Strathaus

A transnational itinerant cinema

In 2011, an archive of film and audio material re-emerged in Bissau. On the verge of complete ruination, the footage testifies to the birth of Guinean cinema as part of the decolonising vision of Amílcar Cabral, the liberation leader assassinated in 1973. In collaboration with the Guinean filmmakers Sana na N'Hada and Flora Gomes, and many allies, Filipa César imagines a journey where the fragile matter from the past operates as a visionary prism of shrapnel to look through. Digitised in Berlin, screened at various locations of what would come to resemble a transnational itinerant cinema, the archive convokes debates, storytelling, and forecasts. From isolated villages in Guinea-Bissau to European capitals, the silent reels are now the place from where people search for antidotes for a world in crisis.

“Sound and image were always out of sync in this project”

Let's start by talking about your choice for the opening scene. We see fighters behind trees, the footage is upside down. A text says that it is the kapok tree that sees the freedom fighters upside down. I had to look up what a kapok tree is exactly. I suspected it was like a weeping willow, but no, a kapok tree looks like any other tree. So why the kapok tree?

Filipa César: It's curious that you thought of a willow tree. There is a haiku that Chris Marker quotes in *Sans Soleil* which was on my mind in this scene: 'The willow sees the heron's image upside down.' When I started to get in touch with the animist culture, which Sana na N'Hada grew up in, I noticed they talk about the kapok tree being the connection between the earth and the sky – the agronomist Amílcar Cabral would call it 'between lithos and atmos'. It seems there is also a connection between this tree and the place where the dead are buried. And this made me think of the relation we had with the archive images in both material and spectral senses. What is there and what is not, or is there in another way. The process of digitisation had to happen very fast, in the context of another coup d'état in Guinea-Bissau (12 April 2012). We had one week to organise the archive material in Bissau for the digitisation in Berlin. We would often stick several film fragments together on one reel, and because of the rush sometimes these reels ended up wrong-sided or upside-down. So they got digitised that way, and it was how we watched some of them for the first time, upside-down or backwards or both. Of course, 'upside-down' also suggests new subjectivities, other modes of seeing, or other things that see. I think the opening scene announces a complication of these systems of seeing.

You start with fragments, different dates, and dispersed locations, elements that would gradually unfold later in the film. We see Sana na N'Hada and Flora Gomes through the filmic documents they made at the time, and in the act of preserving, sharing and commenting on these films today. The filmmakers were at the heart of not only the liberation struggle, but also the story of the struggle.

I met Sana na N'Hada and Flora Gomes in the beginning of 2011 and I was interested in how they and the others had become filmmakers in the context of the liberation struggle. I had an urge to do something about this unique, but lesser-known cinema history, and it was clear to me from the beginning

that I wouldn't be the one to tell the story of their struggle. At some point I realised that cinema here was a channel to access a common past, not in the formatted sense of 'opposite perspectives', but that actually cinema provides us with a common ground. We also shared a reference to Chris Marker, who had worked with the Guinean filmmakers in Bissau in 1979, and who was the first who mentioned Sana to me as someone I should talk to. As you know, the images of the Bissau carnival in Marker's *Sans Soleil* were shot by Sana. This means that long ago I had seen images shot by him without knowing it. This connected us differently than any stigmatised relation between Portuguese and Guinean people. Sana also told me about the mobile cinemas which they had done with Chris Marker, going to Guinean villages and showing films. And I said to him, why don't we do this again, this time with the images that we just digitised from your archive?

I think one of the strengths of the film is how it makes us see things. We see how the film material has decayed, how it is being touched; we see what we can see, and we see that there are images that we cannot see anymore. And we are able to see these lost images in relation to the new images that we are given to see: of the setting up of the mobile cinema, the waiting, the sounds of children in the background. A room in a radio station, and how the room itself was built from boards. One can see the way they assembled their own radio equipment, which connects this radio praxis to the cinema praxis: building the cinema, a cinema culture.

You are mentioning very important elements. Our one-month tour with the mobile cinema was mainly organised by Suleimane Biai, a young filmmaker who also studied in Cuba, but in a post-independence context, and who has worked as an assistant for both Flora and Sana. He put together a team, and it was him who brought in a young radio maker, Aissatu Seide, who then moderated almost all of our cinema sessions in Guinea and also joined us in Berlin later. Each time we arrived at a location – we would normally arrive the day before or in the morning before the screening –, first thing Aissatu would go to the radio station of the place and ask them to announce our screening. She knows that radio is still the most important means of communication in Guinea-Bissau, where you barely have Internet and where, in the countryside, electricity is still produced by generators. Radio had already been the most important means of communication during the liberation struggle.

It's interesting to see how these practical choices shaped what we see in the film. There are actually two journeys layered in your images. One is the journey with the films and the filmmakers, the mobile cinema through Guinea-Bissau and then also to other places, like Berlin. At the same time there are the encounters with the digitised archive contents themselves, a second journey, which we see as a layer placed over parts of the images of the first.

Do you know how the material had arrived at us? It was first the images, and then the sound. First we got support for digitising the film material, and only half a year later we got an additional amount for digitising the magnetic sound tapes. I mean, we can say that sound and image were always out of sync in this project. It was very important to decide that we would look at the things as we found them. And it became a core question, how to re-propose without trying to synch, complete or correct anything, as if it were wrong. We knew

there were fragments of films in this archive that had been in the making, but we were just looking at them as they were, and not trying to finish these films. So this out-of-sync situation remained very present, and it allowed for Sana na N'Hada and Flora Gomes to frequently change their live commentaries according to context. Sana would say different things in Paris, in London or in Boé. Rather than producing a finished thing, the project became a workshop for thinking with the material, for producing a floating knowledge or discourse.

As spectators of your film we are shuttling between past and present by moving in and out of these images that are sometimes inside each other. Seeing two times, but also seeing them at the same time. This makes us create relationships between different historical times whose meaning is not absolute, as you said: the stories, the commentary changes. It also brings up the question of who we are watching this today. Do we assume we are the people talking, or the people being talked to, the people who have caused this condition, or the people who are indifferent to it or ignorant of it? There's a recurring image in the film that seems to literally entangle us in this kind of questioning: a dense mass of mangroves shown from different vantage points, sometimes from inside, sometimes from the outside.

Guinea-Bissau is a flat land with many saltwater rivers and estuaries. Like in other countries, political instability has resulted in a loss of legal control and protection against overfishing. Sana na N'Hada says that the only reason they still have fish there is because the mangroves protect the spawn and the eggs. But the mangroves also made me think about philosophical uses of the term rhizome, by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and more precisely by Édouard Glissant. The rhizomatic structure of the mangroves, besides echoing the possibility of multiple connections and relations, installs a kind of resistance to understanding, but also the resistance to penetration, a natural protection of a place that is accessible by water. The Portuguese came from the waterside as well. I just wanted to convoke these elements through the mangroves, without making it a main subject, but rather a latent entity.

*There is a similarly poetic quality, but also a similar restraint in the commentary text, the essay that runs through **Spell Reel**. Many people are credited in this film and you call it a collective work, yet this essay seems to particularly express your own position. How do you describe the collective character of the making of this film?*

When I say collective I want to strengthen the idea of consent against the conventional idea of authorship expressed in 'directed by'. But it is not to obscure my own position. I edited the film and the essay gives space to my own reflections on the process. But it's a film that wouldn't exist if it hadn't been produced through a collective process from beginning to end.

Interview: Ala Younis, recorded via Skype on 6 January 2017, transcribed by Barbara Marcel, edited by Tobias Hering



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Filipa César was born in Porto in 1975. She studied Painting at the Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Porto and at the Faculdade de Belas Artes of the University of Lisbon. In 2008, she completed an MA in Art in Context at Berlin University of the Arts. Since 2001, Filipa César has exhibited her artworks in both solo and group exhibitions in several different countries. She began making films in 2007. She lives and works in Berlin.

Films

2007: *Rapport* (16 min.), *Allee der Kosmonauten* (8 min.). 2008: *Le passeur* (34 min.). 2009: *The Four Chambered Heart* (29 min.). 2010: *Insert* (10 min.), *Memograma* (40 min.), *Porto, 1975* (10 min.). 2011: *The Embassy* (7 min.). 2012: *Cuba* (10 min., Forum Expanded 2013), *Cacheu* (10 min.). 2013: *Conakry* (10 min.). 2014: *Mined Soil* (32 min.). 2015: *Transmission from the Liberated Zones* (30 min., Forum Expanded 2016). 2017: *Spell Reel*.