



DOI: 10.22363/2313-0660-2025-25-2-223-235


EDN: MKTVZU

Research article / Научная статья

The Image of the African Other in French Cinema During the Collapse of the Colonial Empire, 1945–1960

Anton S. Gavrilov  , Elena G. Zueva 

RUDN University, Moscow, Russian Federation

 antongavrilov96@yandex.ru

Abstract. As European society has become increasingly multicultural, interest in the problems of representation of ethnic and racial minorities in contemporary Western cinema has grown significantly. The processes taking place in Western cinema are a response to the political challenges posed by immigration, globalization and the problems of interethnic and international relations. According to some researchers, the roots of these problems should be sought in the colonial past. It is therefore particularly relevant today to look at the history of colonialism and its cultural aspects. Cinema as a historical source provides valuable insights into the manner in which the colonial era constructed cultural boundaries between the West and the East, as well as between the colonizer and the colonized Other. In particular, Third Republic films about colonies in Africa supported the colonial discourse of their time, reflecting the power of the French colonial empire, and portraying the colonizers as noble, brave, and selfless and the colonized “others” as exotic, savage, and rebellious. However, after the World War II, in the wake of decolonization, the relevance of previous approaches to representing the empire and its possessions was called into question. This article reveals the influence of the political decolonization process on the ideological content of French cinema about the Empire during specified period, the changing approaches to the visual representation of the colonized Other, and how these changes were perceived by the audience. According to the authors, such historical research can help to better understand the origins of modern phenomena in European cinema and Western culture in general. The work uses French films from 1945–1960 as historical sources. The authors examine cinema through the frame of postcolonial theory, as a tool for strengthening colonial power and forming ideas about the colonized Other. In analyzing the films, the authors use an approach that examines their genesis, content, cinematic imagery and public response. Based on the analysis, it is concluded that the need to soften the colonial discourse in the context of the Empire collapse led to the ideological content of the Fourth Republic’s cinema becoming more contradictory. It reflected, on the one hand, nostalgia for the past imperial greatness, and on the other, uncertainty, a desire to stay away from current problems, and even sympathy for the anticolonial movement. Stereotypical ideas about the colonized, although they did not completely disappear from the screens, still evolved along with how the empire itself transformed, giving rise to images of the Other that were atypical of the earlier period.

Key words: Africa, France, decolonization, cinema, representation, colonial discourse, stereotype

Conflicts of interest. The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Authors’ contributions. A.S. Gavrilov: development of the research concept, methodology selection, search, viewing and analysis of film material, writing the main sections of the article. E.G. Zueva: scientific supervision of the research, reviewing and editing the manuscript, participation in the discussion and formulation of conclusions. All authors have read the final version of the article and approved it.

© Gavrilov A.S., Zueva E.G., 2025




This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/legalcode>

For citation: Gavrilov, A. S., & Zueva, E. G. (2025). The image of the African Other in French cinema during the collapse of the colonial empire, 1945–1960. *Vestnik RUDN. International Relations*, 25(2), 223–235. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-0660-2025-25-2-223-235>

Образ африканского Другого во французском кино периода распада колониальной империи в 1945–1960 гг.

А.С. Гаврилов  , Е.Г. Зуева 

Российский университет дружбы народов, Москва, Российская Федерация
 antongavrilov96@yandex.ru

Аннотация. По мере того как европейское общество становится все более мультикультурным, интерес к проблемам репрезентации этнических и расовых меньшинств в современном западном кинематографе заметно растет. Процессы, происходящие в западном кино, являются ответом на политические вызовы, связанные с вопросами иммиграции, глобализации, проблемами межэтнических и международных отношений, корни которых, по мнению некоторых исследователей, следует искать в колониальном прошлом. Поэтому обращение к истории колониализма, его культурным аспектам сегодня приобретает особую актуальность. Рассмотрение кинематографа в качестве исторического источника может дать полезные сведения о том, каким образом в колониальную эпоху выстраивались культурные границы между Западом и Востоком, колонизатором и колонизированным Другим. В частности, фильмы времен Третьей республики, рассказывавшие о колониях в Африке, поддерживали колониальный дискурс своего времени, отражали силу французской колониальной империи, изображая колонизаторов благородными, храбрыми и самоотверженными, а колонизированных «других» — экзотическими, дикими и непокорными. Однако после Второй мировой войны в условиях начавшейся деколонизации актуальность прежних подходов к репрезентации империи и ее владений оказалась под вопросом. В исследовании выявлено влияние процесса политической деколонизации на идеологическое содержание французского кино об империи в указанный период, рассмотрено изменение подходов к визуальной репрезентации колонизированного Другого и то, как эти перемены воспринимались зрительской аудиторией. По мнению авторов, такое историческое исследование может помочь лучше понять истоки современных явлений в европейском кинематографе и западной культуре в целом. В качестве исторических источников в работе используются французские фильмы 1945–1960 гг. Кинематограф рассматривается авторами в ракурсе постколониальной теории как инструмент укрепления колониальной власти и формирования представлений о колонизированном Другом. При анализе кинокартин используется подход, включающий изучение истории их создания, содержания, кинообразов и реакции публики. На основе анализа сделан вывод, что необходимость смягчить колониальный дискурс в условиях распада империи привела к тому, что идеологическое содержание кино Четвертой республики стало более противоречивым. В нем отразились, с одной стороны, ностальгия по бывшему имперскому величию, а с другой — неуверенность, желание абстрагироваться от актуальных проблем и даже сочувствие антиколониальному движению. Стереотипные представления о колонизированном, хотя и не исчезли с экранов полностью, все же эволюционировали вместе с трансформацией самой империи, порождая нетипичные для предшествующего периода образы Другого.

Ключевые слова: Африка, Франция, деколонизация, кинематограф, репрезентация, колониальный дискурс, стереотип

Заявление о конфликте интересов. Авторы заявляют об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

Вклад авторов. Гаврилов А.С.: разработка концепции исследования, подбор методологии, поиск, просмотр и анализ киноматериала, написание основных разделов статьи. Зуева Е.Г.: научное руководство исследованием, рецензирование и редактирование рукописи, участие в обсуждении и формулировании выводов. Все авторы ознакомлены с окончательной версией статьи и одобрили ее.

Для цитирования: Гаврилов А. С., Зуева Е. Г. Образ африканского Другого во французском кино периода распада колониальной империи в 1945–1960 гг. // Вестник Российского университета дружбы народов. Серия: Международные отношения. 2025. Т. 25, № 2. С. 223–235. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-0660-2025-25-2-223-235>

Introduction

In contemporary Western cinema, there is a growing trend towards ethnic diversity in casting, redistribution of leading/secondary roles, positive/negative images in favor of characters of color, careful attention to issues of representation of racial minorities, their culture and experience on screen, etc. French cinema is no exception: “the struggle against discrimination on the basis of one’s origins,” “the visibility of the ensemble of populations that make up French society today,” “the valorisation of their memory, history, and cultural patrimony and their ties to France” are the strategies of state cinematographic institutions today (Stewart, 2018, p. 283). This cinematographic shift reflects a broader social, economic and cultural transformation of Western society linked to immigration processes, globalization, the crisis of European identity and other issues rooted in the colonial era (Majumdar, 2007; Bancel et al., 2017).

It is therefore particularly relevant to turn to the history of colonialism and, in particular, its cultural aspects. A significant contribution to this study has been made by specialists working within the mainstream of postcolonial studies. E. Said’s books *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism* showed that the West to a certain extent “constructed” the East by appropriating the right to describe it in scientific and artistic texts, and thereby ensuring not only its political and economic, but also its cultural dominance (Said, 2012; 2021).

In developing this concept, the researchers focused on the further analysis of colonial discourse as “the study of the various kinds of representation through which the Europeans described, catalogued, categorized, imagined, and talked about Asians or Africans” (Nayar, 2012, p. 4). They underlined the existence of a binary system in Western culture, in which the

colonizer is the “self” and the colonized is the Other, in which the West thinks of itself in terms of its noblest achievements such as science, progress, humanism, and of the non-West in terms of its real or imagined deficiencies (Shohat & Stam, 1994, p. 3). The colonial discourse emphasized the differences between them in every possible way, helping Europeans to realize their identity and position themselves within the colonial system. Fine art, music, literature, media, etc., by depicting other nations and cultures in a certain way and supporting myths and stereotypes about them, contributed to the formation of colonial thinking among Europeans and justified the colonial order.

In the contemporary context, a number of scholars argue that Europe is in urgent need of overcoming the above-mentioned cultural attitudes. The problem of overcoming Eurocentrism and European universalism as a “discursive residue common to colonialist, imperialist, and racist discourse,” a “form of vestigial thinking” that permeates modern culture, is on the agenda (Stam, 2000, p. 269). Despite the fact that political decolonization has already occurred, and the colonies have gained political independence, what remains to be addressed, however, is cultural decolonization (overcoming the stereotypical images of non-Western societies that have developed over hundreds of years of European expansion and hegemony) (Pieterse, 1992, p. 9). For France, this seems to be important both for ensuring internal stability and security, and for strengthening international ties with its former colonies.

Historiography and Methodology of the Study

In the first half of the 20th century, the colonial idea had a profound impact on

the political and cultural life of France. The topic of the empire was also picked up by the cinema, which has recently become one of the most important sources for studying colonial discourse and indirect ways of manifesting imperial ideology (Shohat & Stam, 1994; Ponzanesi & Waller, 2012). The visual turn in the social sciences led to the emergence of specialized studies abroad on French cinema, examining this art form as an instrument of imperial propaganda, analyzing its inherent methods of representation and images of the colonized Other (Sherzer, 1996; Slavin, 2001; Benali, 1998). Russian historiography has also paid attention to the role of cinema in the colonial culture of France. This issue is addressed in the recent work of V.S. Mirzekhanov (2021), but in our opinion, the topic deserves further study.

An interesting and promising approach is to examine the evolution of cinematic images of the Other in relation to the changing historical context. This approach allows us to find out whether the process of political decolonization (the process of gaining political independence by countries which previously were under control of European powers) of Asian and African countries after World War II influenced the ideological content of French films about the empire. It also helps us to understand whether we can talk about a change in approaches to the visual representation of colonies and their inhabitants on the movie screen in connection with the collapse of the empire. It also allows us to identify what French cinema can tell us about the attitude of French society to the changes that were taking place.

To answer these questions, this study utilizes a series of French feature films about Africa made between 1945 and 1960 as a historical source. In our opinion, these films most vividly reflect the main themes and ideas inherent in the French colonial discourse during this period, as well as various ways of depicting African “others” on the movie screen. From a

postcolonial theoretical perspective, French cinema is considered as a tool for promoting certain ideals and values, a way of shaping ideas about national and cultural identities, an important element of colonial discourse that contributed to the strengthening and maintenance of colonial power. The adoption of a historical and cultural approach to film analysis enables the consideration of films in relation to social, political and cultural processes as a reflection of the historical context.

While analyzing films, we focus on the approach proposed by Russian authors E.V. Volkov and E.V. Ponomareva, which involves the following:

- 1) the process of the film’s creation, its concept and purpose,
- 2) the film’s content, cinematic images,
- 3) the audience’s reaction to the film (Volkov & Ponomareva, 2012, p. 23).

In examining the ways in which the racial Other is represented in films, we also use some of the recommendations of the American film theorist R. Stam, who suggests “asking precise questions about the images themselves.” For example, how often and for how long do “others” appear compared with the Euro characters? Are the “others” active, desiring characters or decorative props? How do the characters’ positions communicate social distance or status differences? (Stam, 2000, pp. 277–278).

Bearing in mind the importance of technical and artistic techniques (framing, lighting, sound, editing, etc.) in shaping the image and conveying the discourse, we primarily focus on analyzing the script within which the African characters act. The plot plays a key role in revealing the ideas and values that the filmmakers seek to convey to the audience.

Finally, sources of information such as critical reviews and box office data provide us with important additional information about the film perception and the interpretation of images by the audience.

Stereotypes of Africa in Colonial Cinema: An Attempt of Reanimation

From the very beginning colonial cinema (i.e. films produced by the metropolis about its colonies, which are frequently regarded as a distinct genre), along with other media, have played a significant role in propagating the imperial idea. It became an important source of ideas for the French audience about the empire and its distant corners (Sorlin, 1991, p. 135). Colonial cinema reached its peak of popularity in the interwar period. It captivated audiences with exoticism, an atmosphere of romance and adventure, giving the opportunity to experience vivid impressions and to feel a sense of belonging to the greatness of their country, and thus brought enormous profits to its creators. The vast majority of these films were set in Africa, particularly in Algeria and Morocco. These films reflected the main stereotypes of the continent, entrenched in French culture. In order to establish a clear “starting point” from which to analyze the subsequent changes in images, a brief overview of the main points is necessary.

The thematic content of colonial films set in Africa typically encompasses several keys, including the exploration of uncharted territory, the pacification of rebels and bandits, missionary work, civilizing missions, and interracial relations. On the silver screen, the continent was portrayed as a strange territory yearning for colonization, a virgin land, a wild and dangerous place. The colonial environment was depicted as almost the complete opposite of the ‘civilized world’ and served as a backdrop against which the European could demonstrate his strength. The jungle or the uninhabited expanses of the Sahara were a great place to create an atmosphere of adventure, and stereotypical images of North African cities with oriental bazaars and camels which emphasized that “others” lived there. To create a sense of ‘Otherness,’ not only the exotic landscape was used, but also the exotic social environment.

“Thanks” to films about bandits and the Foreign Legion, some North African cities acquired a sinister reputation: Algiers, Casablanca, Tangier and others became the crime capitals of colonial cinema.

The visual background to the story was also created by the natives, who were just a part of the scenery with minimal agency and almost no right to speak. The inhabitants of Africa are depicted as a picturesque, noisy and colorful crowd surrounding the main characters. They could be assigned the secondary role of a “good,” grateful, but ignorant servant who has given himself under the protection of France and acknowledges his supposed inferiority compared to the European. Another option is a “bad” native, a villain, a rebel, or a fanatic. The antagonists in French cinema were most often the Arab population of North Africa, presented as scoundrel with a sly look, a sharp beard and daggers on their belts. According to the plot, the Arabs often rebelled, but the viewer wasn’t offered an explanation of the reasons for this. This approach served to portray them as inherently irrational and inherently cruel. However, in terms of their position in the imperial narrative, the Arabs were somewhat higher than the inhabitants of Sub-Saharan, since they still had their own culture, based on the Muslim religion and medieval customs (Mirzekhanov, 2014). We can see similar images in many films about Africa in the 1930s.¹

In the post-war years, when colonial cinema returned to the screens, Africa once again became an exotic setting for a variety of genres, including love and crime dramas, adventure films, and military films about the heroes of the empire.²

¹ For example, “*La Bandera*,” 1935. Directed by Julien Duvivier. France; “*L’appel du silence*,” 1936. Directed by Léon Poirier. France; “*Pépé le Moko*,” 1937. Directed by Julien Duvivier. France; “*Trois de Saint-Cyr*,” 1938–1939. Directed by Jean Paul Paulin. France; etc.

² For example, “*Sidi-Bel-Abbès*,” 1954. Directed by Jean Alden-Delos. France; “*Le grand jeu*,” 1954. Directed by Robert Siodmak. France/Italy.

One of the favorite themes of these films was the fight against rebels and bandits in the colonies. A notable example of this genre is the film “*L’escadron blanc*”³ (1949), which was based on the novel of the same name by J. Peyré (1931) with the support of the French Ministry of the Armed Forces of France and the Governor-General of Algeria. This certainly influenced the ideological direction of the film. Paying tribute to the Army of Africa, the film tells the story of a military unit in the Sahara, consisting of several French officers and local Berber soldiers (“good” Africans), whose task is to fight uprisings and robberies carried out by native nomads (“bad” Africans). Having received a telegram with a message about one of these rebellions, the squadron captain decides to go into the desert to track down and eliminate the rebel gang. The viewer is presented with the same ‘Otherness’ of the wild, deserted and deadly Africa from the films of the 1930s, and that’s why some journalists then compared the film to the pre-war “classics.” The local population also serves as an exotic background: it is present in the frame quite often, has a few lines, but practically does not affect the development of the plot, playing the role of servants, camel drivers and a mass of soldiers. Since the detachment is led by French officers who make the most important decisions, the film evidently demonstrates a hierarchy in social status between them and the representatives of the indigenous peoples. Along the way, the squadron suffers losses, and the captain himself dies. The remnants of the detachment are inspired and prepared for a decisive battle with the nomads by a young lieutenant, who kills the leader of the rebels in the finale and then returns the detachment home. In this way, according to the reviewer, the film successfully conveys the spirit of national greatness inherent in the literary source, which “drives a handful of people heading into the vast expanses of the Sahara

with the sole purpose of preserving the French flag there.”⁴

However, the revival of military films about the exploits of French officers or soldiers of the Foreign Legion was short-lived. They did not have the same success as before. The end of the protracted history of the genre was put by the remake of the film “*Le grand jeu*” (1954), the release date of which coincided with the defeat of the French in Indochina and the beginning of the war in Algeria. According to the French researcher F. Delmeulle, despite the large budget and the cinema stars in the cast, it’s the box office failure of the film clearly demonstrated the moral obsolescence, unattractiveness of such films and their obvious discrepancy with the surrounding reality (Delmeulle et. al., 1993, p. 78). Now colonial cinema was faced with the brewing crisis of the empire, which had to be taken into account.

The Crisis of the Empire: New Accents in Colonial Cinema

After World War II, the main goal of the French ruling circles in the field of colonial policy was to prevent the complete collapse of the colonial empire. However, the government’s efforts to restructure it into the French Union and partial concessions to the demands of the peoples living in the colonies did not save France from losing its overseas territories. The war in Indochina ended with defeat in 1954. The struggle for independence in Africa was becoming more widespread. The Algerian War (1954–1962) completed the actual collapse of the French colonial empire. Society in the metropolis was traumatized and divided: events in the colonies fermented fierce internal political debates about the fate of the empire, making issues of national identity relevant.

³ “*L’escadron blanc*,” 1949. Directed by René Chanas. France // Odnoklassniki. URL: <https://ok.ru/video/5200046459402> (accessed: 10.11.2022).

⁴ Edon R. *L’escadron blanc*. Sur les chemins de la grandeur // Paroles francaises. 08.07.1950 / En recueil d’articles de presse. Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Arts du spectacle, 8-RSUPP-2785. 2015. URL: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10527224/f19.item> (accessed: 05.01.2024).

The above circumstances affected the cinema of the Fourth Republic, making it apolitical. In the context of the post-war difficulties, French cinema did not play the role of an irritant, but a tool of healing wounds and reconciling society (Buss, 1988, pp. 42–43). The policy of the French authorities regarding cinema and images of the Other on the screen became more cautious, as racist stereotypes could cause a negative reaction from the indigenous population of the colonies (Genova, 2013, p. 45). As many historians point out, French cinema preferred not to notice the current problems of the empire, which was due to censorship restrictions (Cowans, 2015, p. 199; Delmeulle et al., 1993, p. 78). Filmmakers yielded to the demands of the state and themselves preferred to avoid sharp corners, adapting to new realities, as well as looking for other ways of representing overseas territories and their inhabitants.

The Fourth Republic sought to demonstrate that a properly modified union would provide all its members with prosperity much faster than any of them could achieve on their own. The “white man’s burden” remained an important argument for opponents of decolonization. Many post-war films continued to advocate the responsibility to educate and help “savage” peoples. The emphasis of colonial cinema shifted from glorifying the heroic conquest of unknown territories to promoting paternalism and partnerships with the population of the colonies. Education, engineering projects (e.g. building railways, dams, etc.), medical care, etc. became more prevalent topics in films.⁵

An example is the feature film “*Il est minuit, docteur Schweitzer*”⁶ (1952), dedicated to the life and work of the German-French

theologian and missionary of the early 20th century A. Schweitzer. According to the plot of the film, a doctor working in Gabon has to overcome the ignorance and superstitions of the natives, opposed to Western civilization and education. The Africans on the screen do not understand European customs and look stupid. For example, due to illiteracy, they do not understand how to take the medicine given to them until it is clearly explained. European medicine is little understood by the natives, who believe that a patient under anesthesia is dead and the “white witch doctor” miraculously brings him back to life when the effect of the medicine wears off. They have more faith in their sorcerers, who offer human sacrifices as a solution. The natives are portrayed as lazy idlers, sitting around doing nothing instead of carrying out assignments. The missionary also comes face to face with the savagery and cruelty of the Africans. They get drunk, rob, brutally kill a local priest, and engage in cannibalism. The native is not equal to the white man; throughout the film, it is the African who is the constant object of care and the target of moralizing. The message of the film is clear: France is a civilizing force, caring for the backward peoples of the empire, working to wean savages from their barbaric customs, and even after the war this remains the case. Much remains to be done, and the death of the priest indicates that the French are even willing to make sacrifices in pursuit of this noble mission.

A characteristic feature of post-war colonial cinema was a more sensitive attitude to the realism of the image. Filmmakers could rely on documentary to avoid accusations of bias and to inform the French and African audiences that they were not inventing anything in the image of the colonies and their inhabitants but telling the truth.

The documentary-style film “*Paysans noirs*” (1949) was shot on location in the Ivory Coast. We can reconstruct the plot and ideological orientation of the film based on

⁵ For example, “*Les conquérants solitaires*,” 1952. Directed by Claude Vermorel. France; “*La plus belle des vies*,” 1956. Directed by Claude Vermorel. France; “*Oasis*,” 1955. Directed by Yves Allégret. France/FRG.

⁶ “*Il est minuit, docteur Schweitzer*,” 1952. Directed by André Haguët. France // Odnoklassniki. URL: <https://ok.ru/video/96993544942> (accessed: 03.03.2023).

press materials from that time.⁷ The author of the story of the same name, R. Delavignette, a former colonial administrator and governor-general in several African countries, a supporter of respect for indigenous peoples, had a hand in the film (Crisp, 2015, pp. 184–185). The life of the natives was shown in the film with documentary accuracy, the dark-skinned characters were played by local people, but the script was completely fictitious. According to the plot, a young colonial administrator, a doctor, and an engineer, who are the only white people in the film, strive to organize a peanut butter factory in the middle of the remote villages of the Ivory Coast, located in the heart of the tropical forest and consisting of several miserable huts. All three are presented as noble altruists whose only goal is to bring European standards of hygiene, health care, labor laws and civil rights to the savages. In this way, the film glorified the civilizing mission of France. The heroes have to overcome not only natural disasters, but also the deep backwardness of the local population. The blacks appear to the viewer as superstitious, cowardly and lazy, but harmless (“good” Africans). The production process is also difficult because the local nobles and chief Famoro (“bad” Africans), who keep their fellow tribesmen in slavery and are jealous of the colonists’ power, are dissatisfied with the activities of the colonists. They hinder the establishment of a democratic order by killing supporters of the French. In the end, however, the trio copes with all the obstacles of civilization, and the land entrusted to them finds harmony and the joy of life in labor. The patriotic press responded to the film in general positively, pointing out the important positive purpose of its production: “At a time when it is appropriate to stigmatize French imperialism and colonialism, it is necessary to show the

metropolitan population that wherever France has sown, our country has reaped something other than hatred and spite.”⁸

The above-mentioned films depicted indigenous peoples as suffering from their own backwardness, incapable of an independent existence. They painted an image of the African that was ideal for post-war cinema — a grateful colonized person who does not challenge his subordinate position: “The native is no longer this wild being or a simple object of curiosity, but he remains a submissive being, lazy and finally unable to live without the colonial presence” (Soldé, 2020, p. 75).

Such films often flopped at the box office. Only the “*Il est minuit, docteur Schweitzer*” managed to attract a huge audience of 3.3 million viewers and turned out to be quite successful. According to “*La cinématographie française*,” the total revenue for the first week of the film’s release exceeded 19 million francs, and the screenings were met with “multiple applause at the end of each session.”⁹ French film scholar S. Hayward explains this by the fact that in the year the film was released, the real A. Schweitzer was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, which fueled public interest. Therefore, even before its release, the film, praising the heroism of the doctor and the greatness of France as a civilizing force, was perceived as a major event (Hayward, 2010, pp. 496–498). This may indicate that, in the early 1950s, some part of the French public still had a nostalgic feeling of the necessity and legitimacy of the empire. However, the lack of interest shown by a significant portion of the audience in such films could be indicative of a collective desire to abstract itself from France’s current problems in the colonies.

⁸ Ibid. P. 15.

⁹ Feltin M. “*Il Est Minut, Docteur Schweitzer*” provoquera-il un nouveau divorce public-critique? // *La cinématographie française*. 1952 (Novembre 29). No. 1494. P. 6. URL: <https://archive.org/details/lacinmatographie1475pari/page/n447/mode/2up?view=theater> (accessed: 05.03.2023).

⁷ “*Paysans noirs*” film de Georges Regnier // En recueil d’articles de presse. 12.03.1953. Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Arts du spectacle, 8-RSUPP-2800. 2021. URL: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10532413x/f21.item> (accessed: 05.01.2024).

Anti-Colonial Message: Atypical Cinema Images of the Other

At the same time, leftist sentiments in France grew after the end of the war. Critics of colonialism became increasingly vocal, and comments on imperial practices began to occupy an increasingly important place in public discourse (Blanchard et al., 2014, p. 274). There was an increase in the number of movements that condemned the exploitation and oppression of colonized peoples, actively supported their national liberation struggle, and opposed the French military intervention, in which a revival of fascism could be recognized (Kalter, 2016, pp. 111–123).

At the same time, iconic short documentary films on Africa appeared as a cinematic expression of anti-colonialist protest. These non-commercial films, which were often banned and distributed underground, demonstrated to their small audiences a completely different image of the “black continent” than the official newsreels. The most famous of these were the documentary “*Afrique 50*”¹⁰ (1950) by R. Vautier, which denounced the exploitation of colonies by French businessmen and financiers, who condemned the local population to total poverty, and the documentary “*Les statues meurent aussi*”¹¹ (1953) by C. Marker and A. Resnais, which explored the decontextualization and distortion of African culture by Europeans. At the same time, the documentary film “*Les maîtres fous*”¹² (1955) and the feature film “*Moi, un noir*”¹³ (1958) by the

ethnographer and director J. Rouch were released, critically examining the influence of colonialism on the lives, customs, and psychology of Africans.

In its turn, in feature films from 1945–1960, anti-colonial messages (statements reflecting various forms of resistance to the political, economic and cultural practices of colonialism) were rare (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2013, pp. 11–12). Only a few films, produced on the periphery of the French film industry, in collaboration with other countries, contained criticism of the colonial policy of Europeans and offered atypical images of the African Other. These films were censored, hit the screen late, lost their relevance and went unnoticed at the box office.

As an example, we will cite the film “*Bel ami*”¹⁴ (1955). The film’s authors, L. Daquin, V. Pozner and R. Vaillant were close to the Communist Party and saw in culture an opportunity to condemn colonial violence and its political consequences (Soldé, 2020, p. 77). The film is far from exotic, Africa is not shown to the viewer, but the characters talk about it a lot, and an important part of the plot is the conquest of Morocco. The events take place in 1884. The main character, Georges Duroy, a former soldier, who fought in the Spanish-Moroccan War, arrives in Paris penniless. Using his charm, Georges penetrates the cream of Parisian society, gets a job at a newspaper, writes articles about his service in Africa, and then takes part in the political and financial machinations of his new patron, Mr. Walter, who eventually becomes extremely rich through bank loans and the invasion of Morocco. The film contains no positive characters. The film’s anti-colonial message is its clear condemnation of colonialism and war as sources of commercial

¹⁰ “*Afrique 50*,” 1950. Directed by René Vautier. France // VK. URL: https://vk.com/video-168179353_456239034 (accessed: 25.03.2023).

¹¹ “*Les statues meurent aussi*,” 1953. Directed by Chris Marker and Alain Resnais. France // VK. URL: https://vk.com/video-152153946_456239068 (accessed: 25.03.2023).

¹² “*Les maîtres fous*,” 1955. Directed by Jean Rouch. France // Vimeo. URL: <https://vimeo.com/522513207> (accessed: 06.01.2024).

¹³ “*Moi, un noir*,” 1958. Directed by Jean Rouch. France VK. URL: https://vk.com/video21679346_171625997 (accessed: 25.03.2023).

¹⁴ “*Bel ami*,” 1955. Directed by Louis Daquin. Austria/France/GDR // Video.Mail.ru. URL: https://my.mail.ru/mail/vm_gluschenko/video/57475/238209.html (accessed: 03.04.2023).

gain for the bigwigs of Paris. The dialogue during the dinner party quite clearly demonstrates the position of the authors in relation to the respectable gentlemen gathered. “I think,” — says Duroy, — “that there are great opportunities for us in Morocco.” “And what do the Moroccans think about this?” — asks the interlocutor. “The Moroccans don’t think, madam,” — the hero replies. It is not surprising that the censorship authorities had questions about the content of the film, considering that the war in Algeria began during its production. The authors were forced to change the dialogues and shorten the work, excluding everything that could remind them of the current situation. The film, in its shortened version, was only released in 1957. According to S. Hayward, the director’s version of the film contained original lines and additional scenes: the main character’s service in Morocco was illustrated with footage showing the cruel treatment of Arabs by French soldiers, murders, robberies, and capture for ransom. One of the scenes showed Duroy tearing a gold necklace off an Arab girl, what he only talks about in the film. The board of censors demanded that the scene be cut out entirely (Hayward, 2010, pp. 383–385).

Atypical images of the Other were offered by the film “*Tamango*”¹⁵ (1958). Although the film does not contain a direct anti-colonial message, it is a statement against the slave trade and exploitation as elements of European colonial policy. The film was directed by J. Berry, an American director who was blacklisted by Hollywood for his connections with communists and forced to move to Europe. The film was based on the short story of the same name by P. Mérimée, but the director’s edits to the script turned the story, which portrays Africans in an extremely unfavourable light, into an anti-racist parable about the

liberation of Africa (Miller, 2008, p. 227). The film’s plot unfolds in 1820 on the Dutch ship *Esperanza*, which transports African slaves across the Atlantic Ocean. Among the slaves, the main character stands out — the rebellious Tamango — a black man fighting for the freedom of the captives. This means that the hero is definitely an active character with a clear motivation. In the literary original, Tamango himself was a slave trader who had been tricked into capturing him on the *Esperanza*. In the film, the scriptwriters radically revise the character, making him a fierce opponent of slavery and a bright leader for the slaves. The filmmakers are clearly on their side — the “others” represent “good” in the film. The sense of injustice and the disappointment of hopelessness result in small riots, the Africans try to organize a hunger strike, steal a file and cut their shackles. This leads them, at best, to defeat and punishment, at worst — to hanging from the mast or throwing them overboard as a warning to others. Tamango reproaches Captain Reiker’s concubine, Aiché, when she advises him to obey. As the film progresses, Aiché parts with the hope that the captain will marry her and free her, so she joins Tamango. The ending of the film is tragic. During the last attempt to rebel, Captain Reiker tells the slaves that he will kill them all if they do not surrender. Tamango gives Aiché a chance to leave, but she decides to stay with her fellow slaves. The captain carries out his threat and fires a cannon into the hold. Tamango, Aiché and the other captives die, preferring death to slavery. Thus, Africans are portrayed as victims of European colonialism and slavery. “*Tamango*” was banned from showing in the colonies due to fears of possible unrest. In France, the film was a success, with about 2 million viewers (Hayward, 2010, p. 250).

Conclusion

Thus, the post-war reality, the dramatic process of France losing its colonial empire, the

¹⁵ “*Tamango*,” 1958. Directed by John Berry. France/Italy // Video.Mail.ru. URL: <https://my.mail.ru/bk/albert.yedisanskiy/video/14/83.html> (accessed: 02.04.2023).

attempts to maintain influence on the overseas possessions by proposing the legal formula of the French Union, required adjustments to official rhetoric and propaganda, and a softening of the colonial discourse. In a difficult international context, the authorities of the Fourth Republic had to change the image of their country by presenting a colonizer, but as a partner promoting the economic and social progress of its allies. This, in turn, was reflected in the cinema, particularly in the films from 1945–1960 that focused on the African continent.

The ideological content of French films about the empire made during this particular period was contradictory. On the one hand, the “classical” plots of pre-war colonial cinema proved to be tenacious: patriotic films about conquerors and legionnaires fighting to establish and maintain French power in the colonies, fighting against its opponents, continued to appear on the screens. However, these films were less prevalent during this period and did not generate much enthusiasm among mass audiences, thereby coming into conflict with current political events.

On the other hand, a shift in emphasis within colonial cinema becomes evident from 1945 to 1960. A significant number of films from this period glorified France’s civilizing efforts. Films about Africa with such a message echoed the official rhetoric, emphasizing that the purpose of the French presence there was and remains to support the development of the overseas territories, and that this presence is, therefore, justified and mutually beneficial. These films did not raise any objections from the censorship bodies, which paid close attention to the ideological content, but they were rarely able to attract French audiences to cinema theatres. The same lack of interest in most films about “caring France” as in patriotic films may indicate the desire of the French to avoid the painful topic of empire.

In addition, during this period, “leftist” documentaries and feature films appeared that

not only criticized colonialism, but also morally supported African fighters for national liberation. Since such films were banned and did not reach cinemas, it is impossible to assess exactly how they were received by audiences. Nevertheless, some films that could be conditionally called “anti-colonial,” offering a new approach to representing colonies and their inhabitants, could have been in demand by a part of the audience. In one way or another, their very appearance testifies to the dawn of a new era in which it is no longer possible to be satisfied with a standard set of plots and stereotypes about the colonized Other.

In the context of the changing ideological content of colonial cinema from 1945–1960, a discernible shift in approaches to the depiction of the Other becomes evident. Previously acceptable images were often seen as inconsistent with the message that French officials wanted to convey to audiences. Openly racist representations of Africans and African culture, which had sometimes appeared on the screen before the war, were now highly undesirable in a France interested in maintaining its power in the region. Nevertheless, in most films, representatives of the indigenous population continued to be more of a decorative element than active characters with motivation and history. In some films, the old clichés of the “bad” Africans and Arabs could still be encountered: they were shown as savages, but an Arab could be depicted as a leader, and a black African as a subordinate follower. Nevertheless, a new important aspect in the creation of the screen image of Africa and Africans was the rejection of obsessive exoticism and the desire for realism, documentary depiction, as an argument against possible accusations of bias and the use of stereotypes. The typical image was of an African suffering from his own backwardness, not yet ready for an independent existence without the help of the French.

The most “revolutionary” approach to the representation of the Other was demonstrated by

“anti-colonial” films. In documentaries of similar ideological content, Africa and Africans appeared as victims of French imperialism, and in feature films they could even be the main characters, evoking empathy, challenging the traditional social status of the African as a subordinate, and personifying the “forces of good.” Such a representation of the colonized Other as in the films of the 1950s is unlikely to be found in the previous period, which once again illustrates the profound impact of the decolonization process on French cinema.

Received / Поступила в редакцию: 14.05.2023

Revised / Доработана после рецензирования: 16.02.2025

Accepted / Принята к публикации: 20.03.2025

References

- Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (2013). *Post-colonial studies: The key concepts*. (3rd edition). London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/978023777855>
- Bancel, N., Blanchard, P., Thomas, D., & Pernsteiner, A. (2017). *The colonial legacy in France: Fracture, rupture, and apartheid*. Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt20060bg>
- Benali, A. (1998). *Le Cinéma colonial au Maghreb: L'imaginaire en tromp-l'œil*. Paris: Cerf.
- Blanchard, P., Lemaire, S., Bancel, N., & Thomas, D. (Eds.). (2014). *Colonial culture in France since the revolution*. Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Buss, R. (1988). *The French through their films*. London: B.T. Batsford Ltd.
- Cowans, J. (2015). *Empire films and the crisis of colonialism, 1946–1959*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1353/book.39943>
- Crisp, C. (2015). *French cinema — A critical filmography: Volume 2, 1940–1958*. Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Delmeulle, F., Dubreil, S., & Lefebvre, T. (Eds.). (1993). *Du réel au simulacre: cinéma, photographie et histoire*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Genova, J. E. (2013). *Cinema and development in West Africa*. Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Hayward, S. (2010). *French costume drama of the 1950s: Fashioning politics in film*. Bristol, UK; Chicago: Intellect.
- Kalter, Ch. (2016). *The discovery of the Third World: Decolonization and the rise of the New Left in France, c.1950–1976*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139696906>
- Majumdar, M. A. (2007). *Postcoloniality: The French dimension*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Miller, Ch. L. (2008). *The French Atlantic triangle: Literature and culture of the slave trade*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Mirzekhanov, V. S. (2021). The role of cinema in the formation of colonial myth and colonial culture in 20th-century France. *Istoriya*, 12(3), 24. (In Russian). <https://doi.org/10.18254/S207987840014607-6>; EDN: VTZCNX
- Mirzekhanov, V. S. (2014). The supremacy idea and racial hierarchy in the French colonial culture. *Istoriya*, 5(4), 9. (In Russian). EDN: TDRUGT
- Nayar, P.K. (2012). *Colonial voices: The discourses of empire*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons Inc. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118279007>
- Pieterse, J. N. (1992). *White on black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western popular culture*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Ponzanesi, S., & Waller, M. (2012). *Postcolonial cinema studies* (1st edition). London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203181478>
- Said, E. W. (2012). *Culture and imperialism*. Saint Petersburg: Vladimir Dal' publ. (In Russian).
- Said, E. W. (2021). *Orientalism*. Moscow: Muzei sovremennogo iskusstva “Garazh” publ. (In Russian).
- Sherzer, D. (Ed.). (1996). *Cinema, colonialism, postcolonialism: Perspectives from the French and Francophone world*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Shohat, E., & Stam, R. (1994). *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the media*. London; New York: Routledge.

- Slavin, D. H. (1998). *Colonial cinema and imperial France, 1919–1939: White blind spots, male fantasies, and settler myths*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Soldé, V. (2020). Cinéma, colonialisme et anticolonialisme dans les revues de ciné-clubs confessionnelles ou laïques en France dans l'après Seconde Guerre mondiale. In H. El Bachir & P. Laborderie (Eds.), *Images et réceptions croisées entre l'Algérie et la France* (pp. 69–87). Québec: ESBC. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3866074>
- Sorlin, P. (1991). The fanciful empire: French feature films and the colonies in the 1930s. *French Cultural Studies*, 2(5), 135–151. <https://doi.org/10.1177/095715589100200502>; EDN: JLZKUT
- Stam, R. (2000). *Film theory: An introduction*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell.
- Stewart, M. (2018). 'Images of diversity': Film policy and the state struggle for the representation of difference in French cinema. In M. Gott & T. Schilt (Eds.), *Cinema-monde: Decentred perspectives on global filmmaking in French* (pp. 282–303). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474414999-017>
- Volkov, E. V., & Ponomareva, E. V. (2012). Fiction film as a historic source for the studying of cultural memory. *Bulletin of the South Ural State University. Series: Social Sciences and the Humanities*, (10), 22–26. (In Russian). EDN: NKXOMO

About the authors:

Gavrilov Anton Sergeevich — PhD Student, Department of World History, RUDN University; eLibrary SPIN-code: 7931-0064; ORCID: 0000-0003-2102-3976; e-mail: antongavrilov96@yandex.ru

Zueva Elena Gennadievna — PhD (History), Associate Professor, Department of World History, RUDN University; eLibrary SPIN-code: 1303-9550; ORCID: 0000-0001-8834-3398; e-mail: zueva-eg@rudn.ru