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Screening postcolonial intellectuals: cinematic engagements and postcolonial activism

Sandra Ponzanesi [iD][a] and Ana Cristina Mendes [iD][b]

aDepartment of Media and Culture Studies, Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands; bDepartment of English, University of Lisbon, Lisbon, Portugal

ABSTRACT

This special issue proposes new ways of seeing and thinking about postcolonial intellectuals through the frame of transnational screens. For this purpose, the issue develops around the twofold notion of the intellectual as a *filmmaker* and the intellectual as an *object* of filmmaking. In particular, it focuses on the ways in which this interrelationship expands notions of postcolonial theory and practice regarding the aesthetic and political intervention of intellectuals in transnational screen culture. Many postcolonial figures have been influential not only in rethinking the ways in which representation should be conceived and theorized but also in inspiring new forms of visuality and aesthetics through their life and work. These figures include Frantz Fanon, Assia Djebar, and Stuart Hall, and others explored in this issue, such as Toni Morrison, Raoul Peck, Ai Weiwei, and Steve McQueen. The special issue also includes exclusive interviews with Ai Weiwei and Trinh T. Minh-ha, artists, intellectuals, activists, and filmmakers whose engagement with postcolonial debates, and more broadly with the politics and aesthetics of filmmaking, have contributed to a reshaping of contemporary postcolonial realities and discourses, in scholarship and the public sphere.

We have been trying to theorize identity as constituted, not outside but within representation; and hence of cinema, not as a secondary-order mirror held up to reflect what already exists, but as that form of representation which is able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects, and thereby enable us to discover places from which to speak. (Hall 1994, 237)

This special issue proposes new ways of seeing and thinking about postcolonial intellectuals through the frame of transnational screens. The figures of Stuart Hall, Frantz Fanon, and Assia Djebar inspired the approach taken in this special issue. The idea was to understand the figure of the postcolonial intellectual at the crossroads between theory and the practice of cinema, both as a source of influence on the critical questions of representation, otherness, and minoritization, and as a larger-than-life character whose presence on screen, either during their lifetime or through cinematic testimonials, managed to change both the language of cinema and the traditional interpretation of the figure of the intellectual. The special issue hence develops around the twofold notion of the intellectual as a *filmmaker* and the intellectual as an *object* of

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filmmaking. In particular, it focuses on the ways in which this interrelationship expands notions of postcolonial theory and practice regarding the aesthetic and political intervention of intellectuals in transnational screen culture.

Questions of representation have always been high on the agenda of postcolonial scholarship and cinema studies. Despite this apparent connection, the two fields have been rather entrenched in different disciplinary schools and institutional backgrounds (Ponzanesi and Waller 2012). Yet, through the role and mediation of postcolonial intellectual figures and filmmakers, a synergy was established and a new aesthetic and political dialogue was forged on issues of identity, diaspora, ethnicity, nationalism, gender, and class. Many postcolonial figures have been influential not only in rethinking the ways in which representation should be conceived and theorized but also in inspiring new forms of visuality and aesthetics through their life and work. The postcolonial intellectuals who inspired the research in this special issue made cinema not only an expression of the world they lived in (to cite Hall's words in the opening citation, 'not as a secondary-order mirror held up to reflect what already exists' [1994, 237]) but a transformative tool through which to appraise and change reality.

Postcolonial intellectuals paved the way for pioneering filmmakers who did not fit the norms of mainstream film culture and were searching for new visual registers that would express the conditions of migrancy, minority, and Blackness. Stuart Hall, for example, was not a cinema studies scholar in the strictest sense, but his thinking has been very influential for film studies, especially in connection to cultural studies. A brief examination of the links between Hall and cinema clearly shows how in the 1980s his intellectual work influenced both the thematic and aesthetic choices of many upcoming filmmakers who engaged with issues of race, ethnicity, and diaspora, particularly in British cinema. Hall's ways of seeing and thinking about identity and representation have profoundly shaped cinematic culture from the 80s onwards, as attested in British films like *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), directed by Stephen Frears and based on a screenplay by Hanif Kureishi, along with many others of this period that directly discussed multiculturalism, and multiracial and postcolonial issues, such as *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987), by Frears, *Handsworth Songs* (1986), by John Akomfrah, and *Mona Lisa* (1986), by Neil Jordan (Prysthon 2016).

In his influential essay 'Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation' (1989), Hall investigates the connection between cultural identity and cinematic representation in the Caribbean area. According to Hall, there are at least two ways of looking at cultural identity: one is in terms of shared culture and the other is a concept that recognizes the difference, which constitutes what and who people are. He also discusses how cultural identity ties the modern era to the past and how points of recognition about the concept of cultural identity align with the discourses of the emerging Caribbean cinema. More than analysing the context or the forms of the Caribbean cinema per se, in this essay, Hall argues for an understanding of cinema as enunciative practice and delineates the diaspora as a strategic point to understand the discourses of the Caribbean cinema and peripheral cinemas in general. Rather than speaking about specific filmmakers or films, he proposes a conjunctural discussion between cultural identity and cinematic representation, which helps to think not just about cinema as a form but also about cultural identity and cultural forms as a whole.

Similarly, Hall's essay 'Encoding/Decoding' (1993), which advanced his encoding/ decoding communication model, was the basis of the restructuring of reception studies, even in the field of cinema, while emphasizing, developing, deepening, and questioning concepts such as identity, alterity, and hybridity, and the duality between the West and the East. On the politics of representation, Hall was very vocal on how the image needs to be decoded to untangle the different layers of colonialism, oppression, and domination but also resistance, agency, and counterculture. Instead of simply inverting or discarding terms and hierarchies in his intellectual work, Hall sought to question their essence and network of interrelationships, always discussing the conditions of possibility, continuity, and utility of their construction as part of a conjunctural analysis.

Hall had a direct relationship with the audiovisual productions of the 1980s that changed Black British cinema, impacting in particular the Sankofa Film and Video Collective, co-founded by Isaac Julien, and the Black Audio Film Collective, which included Akomfrah as one of its founders. He influenced these aesthetic and political movements intellectually but also actively participated in them. For instance, Hall collaborated closely with Julien, acting in a small role in the experimental short film *The Attendant* (1993) and collaborating in several of Julien's works, most notably narrating *Looking for Langston* (1989) (which he also analyses in 'The Spectacle of the "Other"' [Hall 1997]) and featuring in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1995, remastered 2017). Akomfrah's documentary *The Stuart Hall Project* (2013), released just after Hall's death, drew on the 2012 installation *The Unfinished Conversation*, which was based on media archival images and conversations with Hall himself. In the documentary, Akomfrah challenges the representation of Blackness in British culture by proposing alternative aesthetic registers, incorporating archive material and newsreel, and making experimental use of sound (see James Harvey's contribution in this special issue). While Hall is the 'intellectual being filmed', Akomfrah also plays a vital role as an intellectual in devoting his career to representing Blackness differently, giving his voice and style to a world that emerges as radical as well as highly poetic.

Before Stuart Hall, another example of an intellectual who influenced both the field of postcolonial theory and cinema studies was Fanon.[1] Fanon wrote and thought about representation and alienation, and about how inferiority and alterity can be interiorized through the representational violence of films. As early as 1952, Fanon, in his classic analysis of racial identity and culture, Black Skin, *White Masks*, used Tarzan films as his example of the potentially damaging psychological effects Euro-American culture could have on colonized subjects. Arguing that 'a host of information and a series of propositions slowly and stealthily work their way into an individual through books, newspapers, school texts, advertisements, movies, and radio and shape his community's vision of the world', Fanon notes:

> We recommend the following experiment for those who are unconvinced: Attend the showing of a Tarzan film in the Antilles and in Europe. In the Antilles the young black man identifies himself de facto with Tarzan versus the Blacks. In a movie house in Europe things are not so clear-cut, for the white moviegoers automatically place him among the savages on the screen. The experiment is conclusive. (Fanon 1967, 131)

Fanon is thus pushing hidden forms of representational violence into the spotlight of public discourse. Postcolonial intellectuals have therefore a complex (and sometimes problematic) relationship with cinema and cinematic representations, in particular, in their role as spokespeople for their communities.

Still, it is crucial to account for the ways in which postcolonial intellectuals, both as filmmakers and as objects of filmmaking, have subverted traditional parameters of representation, genre, narrative, and storytelling practices, and taken up an individualized and charismatic role (sometimes as celebrities) to mediate their presence in Western circuits. In this respect, the role of Assia Djebar as a writer, intellectual, and filmmaker is particularly relevant in undoing the silencing of Algerian women in the narrative of Algerian history, but also in providing a new visual register in which these stories are told through cinema. Films such as *La Nouba* (1975–77) and *La Zerda* (1978–1982) were theorized by Ella Shohat (2003) as belonging to a Post-Third Worldist kind of cinema. Ranjana Khanna (1998) examined Djebar's films as belonging to a Fourth Cinema that goes beyond the limited patriarchal rhetoric of Third Cinema by including women as actors of change but also as intellectual figures who fight for their visibility, legacy, recognition, and alternative aesthetic visions.

Representations of the intellectual

Since its origins, the word 'intellectual' has designated a public figure with considerable cultural capital who sides with oppressed people. In the section of his *Prison Notebooks* devoted to intellectuals, Antonio Gramsci (1971) conceives of intellectuals as educated and influential individuals who are *organic* to a specific historical formation or social group or public – be it hegemonic or struggling to gain hegemony. But it was earlier, with the Dreyfus affair in France at the turn of the twentieth century, that the term emerged in the public sphere to define the group of writers, professors, and journalists siding with the Jewish captain against the false accusations. It comes therefore as no surprise that, according to Said (1996, xvii), intellectuals are responsible for 'underrepresented and disadvantaged groups'. Said configures the intellectual as a figure who is outside their own habitat, always slightly out of place, and therefore unsettled and unsettling, uncompromising, as well as offering double insights into realities that would not otherwise emerge.

An intellectual is therefore someone who speaks truth to power. Yet the role of public intellectuals is not merely a question of speaking up in the name of others. As Michel Foucault pointed out in his interview with Gilles Deleuze (1977), the idea of 'speaking for' has ethical implications, as the public intellectual not only takes responsibility for speaking for others but can also end up ventriloquizing and silencing them (Spivak 1988). Therefore, the role of public intellectuals is particularly complex for postcolonial intellectuals who juggle competing regimes of political representations, individual and collective, playing a crucial role in their community and the host society. Against this background, this special issue considers the figures of postcolonial public intellectuals as engaging with transnational screen representations, as it is a central aspect of their plea for visibility and outreach. We want to create a fluid area of inquiry between intellectuals as objects of filmmaking (e.g. Stuart Hall), intellectuals as filmmakers (e.g. Trinh T. Minha, Raoul Peck, and Steve McQueen), and the conflation of the two realms making the boundaries between self and other, inside and outside, filmmaker and screen irrelevant for the intervention proposed (e.g. Toni Morrison, and Ai Weiwei).

In his article on 'The "Kaleidoscopic Conditions" of John Akomfrah's Stuart Hall', James Harvey closely analyses the intellectual conversations between Hall and Akomfrah that grew from the three-channel installation on the life and work of the Black British

theorist, *The Unfinished Conversation*, and the documentary *The Stuart Hall Project*, an extended version of the installation. Harvey reads the Stuart Hall films as a continuation of Akomfrah's engagement with other Black public figures, including Martin Luther King, Louis Armstrong, and Mariah Carey. Still, he underscores that the films present 'the dialectical sum of two major thinkers' who rethink cinema through the prism of intellectual life and commitment. The Stuart Hall films aesthetically reflect, through the use of archival montage and music, what Hall termed 'the kaleidoscopic conditions of blackness'; in this light, Harvey reads the films as an application of the analytical methods of cultural studies, offering a kaleidoscopic vision of issues on identity and representation.

There is also a feminist and postcolonial agenda undergirding the special issue that wants to highlight intellectual interventions in the male-dominated world of filmmaking. This feminist engagement is undoubtedly clear in Toni Morrison's monumental work and role as a public intellectual. Many of her novels have been turned into film adaptations, but our focus in this issue is on the relationship between Morrison's intellectual and artistic vision and documentary filmmaking. In her article 'Portrait of the Postcolonial Intellectual as a Wise Old Woman: Toni Morrison, Word-Work, and *The Foreigner's Home*', Liedeke Plate examines Morrison's documentary *The Foreigner's Home* (2018), one of the outcomes of her guest-curatorship at the Louvre in 2006. Through a focus on the documentary's dialogic word-work, Plate analyses how Morrison's role as a postcolonial intellectual is staged via aesthetic engagement and political intervention, and amplified through the forging of multiple dialogues in the documentary between literary text, visual artwork, and media.

The scope of this special issue is also to revisit the figure of the intellectual as unique and isolated, and the aim is to reveal the collective forms of mobilization supported by filmmaking, including the problems of funding, production, and distribution. For which figures is this possible and for which figures is it not? How do inclusion and exclusion work in the public sphere for postcolonial intellectuals, and how are these conundrums reflected in recent cinematic productions that put intellectual figures or intellectual engagement at the centre? How do postcolonial intellectuals achieve a more significant impact or different impact through cinema? This holds, for example, for the recent HBO docuseries *Exterminate all the Brutes* (2021), by Raoul Peck, in which he becomes part of the history he narrates and is inescapably embroiled. This painful history is one of colonial exploitation, extraction, and dispossession that continues into our contemporary times. How to narrate the impossible, how to visualize the unseeable? Drawing from his previous productions, such as *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016), based on James Baldwin's unfinished book *Remember This House*, Peck uses archival images, footage, and film fragments, along with new staging, including of himself, to tell the history of Western 'civilization' against the grain, turning images that we are familiar with (for example, from 'Golden Age' Hollywood) into parodies or appalling realities of violence when set up in a different context, edited and reversed to underscore not the linear progress of humankind but its blind undermining.

The article 'Documentary re-enactment in Raoul Peck's *Exterminate All the Brutes*: Countering the work of the imperial camera shutter', by Ana Cristina Mendes, examines how Peck expands the frames of the documentary film and the scholarly essay into an essay film which interweaves the intellectual histories of European colonialism written by

three other intellectuals: Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Sven Lindqvist, and Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz. This interweaving does not happen only at a purely intellectual level as Peck brings the personal to bear on the political when he includes personal memories in the docuseries (for example, his memories paired with Lindqvist's) and his own essay film becomes an intellectual space of history-making, advancing a form of counterhistory and a practice of 'potential history' (Azoulay 2019). Mendes likewise points us to Peck's reflection on the imperial politics of visual technologies such as photography and film, from the staging of racial otherness in nineteenth-century European photography to the whiteness of 'Golden Age' Hollywood.

Filmmaker Steve McQueen has likewise acquired a prominent role in transnational cinema for his critical portrayal of Blackness and racialized identities. *Twelve Years a Slave* (2013) was a major Hollywood success, but the recent TV anthology series *Small Axe* (2020), comprising five films released via the BBC, is probably his magnum opus so far. In the article 'Theatres of Memory; Un-silencing the Past – Steve McQueen's "Small Axe" Anthology', Florian Stadtler closely scrutinizes McQueen's testament to the Windrush generation and the UK's blatantly racist politics through the 1960s, 70s and 80s, charting the impact on Black British subjectivity of crucial moments and events of forced settlement, migration, and discrimination, often silenced and excluded from mainstream narratives. As Stadtler underscores, in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement, McQueen's intellectual and artistic work is especially resonant in a contemporary moment of violence emerging from ultra-nationalisms and new articulations of racial, ethnic, and religious discrimination in the UK. Drawing attention to the importance of releasing this anthology via the platform of public service broadcasting, through his collaboration with BBC 1, bringing issues of social justice, equality, and inclusion to wider audiences and broadening the public discourse around recent British history, Stadtler firmly positions McQueen in the tradition of public intellectuals such as Hall and Trouillot, but also Raphael Samuel, Kobena Mercer, and Paul Gilroy.

Ai Weiwei features twice in this special issue, with an original article by Eszter Zimanyi on Ai's filmmaking and art dealing with the refugee 'crisis' and an exclusive interview with Ana Cristina Mendes. Both contributions focus on different aspects of Ai's role as an intellectual and a filmmaker, as well as a visual artist and political activist who manages to cross conventional boundaries of art and politics. Ai has recently used his camera to document the lived realities of refugees (*Human Flow*, 2017; *The Rest*, 2019; *Rohingya*, 2021), the Covid pandemic (*Coronation*, 2020), and the Hong Kong protests in 2019 (*Cockroach*, 2020). Through Ai Weiwei Films, the artist-activist has harnessed the 'media circulation power' (Hesmondhalgh and Lotz 2020) of streaming platforms such as iTunes, Amazon, Google Play, and Vimeo on Demand. Yet the transgression that characterizes Ai's art has meant that the traditional boundaries between filmmaker and filmmaking are blurred in his works when he puts himself, most often than not, onscreen.

In 'Interrogating the Limits of Humanitarian Art: The Uncomfortable Invitations of Ai Weiwei', Zimanyi examines the role of Ai as one of the most prominent contemporary artists to offer a sustained engagement with Europe's migrant or refugee 'crisis'. She begins by exploring the breadth and variety of Ai's work across media, including documentary film, public installations, gallery exhibits, and performances created and circulated through social media. Ai has earned admiration and sharp criticism for his representations of the migrant or

refugee 'crisis'; Zimanyi reappraises Ai's political invention by arguing that these critiques often fail to fully consider Ai's postcolonial positionality as a Chinese artist living in exile, which inflects his approach to contemporary political and humanitarian crises and mass displacement. To argue for this reappraisal, Zimanyi offers close readings of artistic projects that were perceived as involving questionable ethical practices: the documentary film *Human Flow* (2017), the gallery installation *Laundromat* (2016), and the controversial *India Today* portrait of Ai Weiwei as Alan Kurdi captured in 2016. Mendes's interview with Ai revisits and complements many of the points of Zimanyi's analysis, in particular in terms of considering the limitations of humanitarianism and calls for empathy, but also the power of art in the face of contemporary 'crises', either the refugee 'crisis' or the 'crisis' of the Anthropocene. Sustaining the conversation is an understanding of Ai as an intellectual, a thinker of the world, which he enters into dialogue with as if the world were a readymade. From that assumption, Ai was asked to reflect on recent works on the 'crisis' of the Anthropocene, namely, the transnational film *Tree* (2021) and the monumental iron sculpture *Pequi Tree* (2018–2020), whose process of creation is documented in *Tree*. As Ai reiterates, grounded in political curiosity and selfishness, these and other artworks and films covered in the interview become 'selfless through resonance', as Mendes concludes.

We are also privileged to include in this special issue an exclusive interview with Trinh T. Minh-ha conducted by Domitilla Olivieri, entitled 'In The Spiral of Time'. Trinh is not only a notable theoretical thinker but also a unique filmmaker who has managed to deconstruct the expectations of the repertoire of traditional Western cinema, inserting question marks on the viewer's position, integrating haptic elements and challenging East/ West stereotypes. In *Reassemblage* (1982), Trinh says in answer to her friends' question as to what her film is about, 'Not about, just nearby'. She draws a connection between cinema as a medium and a postcolonial epistemology in which difference becomes originary rather than secondary, and porousness is not threatening but empowering. Trinh's films, together with the essays and interviews in which she discusses her work in the context of both 'high' theory and cinema history, shuffle the 'differences', "otherness", and 'hybridities' generated by totalizing ideological frames and political systems across each other in the creation of a dense web of relational meaning. Olivieri's conversation with Trinh retains both voices: of the interviewer, a scholar and activist, and the interviewee, the intellectual and filmmaker. The dialogue touches on topics related to the idea of the intellectual and the filmmaker as intellectual to consider Trinh's engagements with feminist and postcolonial debates on community belonging and knowledge production and, more broadly, with the politics and aesthetics of filmmaking. The conversation highlights the many ways in which Trinh's films, intellectual works that enact specific modes of being in the world by addressing and mobilizing different (diasporic) communities and subjectivities transnationally, have contributed to a reshaping of the contemporary imagery of postcolonial realities and discourses, in scholarship and the public sphere.

In conclusion, in our collective approach to the intellectual as a filmmaker and the intellectual as an object of filmmaking, we understand the notion of the intellectual in a broad and open way. It is not a normative definition but a relational one whose praxis encompasses artists, individuals, and collectives who perform intellectual labour. How does the postcolonial intellectual (the intellectual as a filmmaker and the intellectual as an object of filmmaking) continue to speak truth to power in an era where public opinion is being increasingly shaped by emotion, when political life seems to be shrinking, and facts have

been replaced by deception, when post-truth rhetoric has acquired such a memetic force? This question clearly resonates with the mission of Third Cinema, a transnational political cinema that is particularly relevant today, nearly six decades after the *Hacia un tercer cine* [*Towards a Third Cinema*] manifesto by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, who claimed that they made their films 'with the camera in one hand and a rock in the other' (1971). 'Civic imagination' (Jenkins, Peters-Lazaro, and Shresthova 2020) is critical in this context, as it forms 'the essential building blocks of their [public intellectuals'] authority to speak out on broad issues of public concern' (Misztal 2007, 1) and to fight for social justice and against authoritarianism, while engaging with the ethically fraught aesthetics of Western cinematic modes of representation.

Note

1. Following Isaac Julian's *White Skin, Black Masks*, Fanon was examined on screen by Göran Olson in the thought-provoking documentary *Concerning Violence* (2014).

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Notes on contributors

Sandra Ponzanesi is Chair and Full Professor of Media, Gender and Postcolonial Studies at the Department of Media and Culture Studies, Utrecht University, the Netherlands. Among her publications are: *Paradoxes of Postcolonial Culture* (Suny, 2004), *The Postcolonial Cultural Industry* (Palgrave, 2014), *Gender, Globalisation and Violence* (Routledge, 2014). She is co-editor of *Migrant Cartographies* (Lexington Books, 2005), *Postcolonial Cinema Studies* (Routledge, 2012), *Deconstructing Europe* (Routledge, 2012), *Postcolonial Transitions in Europe* (Rowman and Littlefield International, 2016) and *Postcolonial Intellectuals in Europe* (Rowman and Littlefield International, 2018). She has also guest edited several special issues on Europe, digital migration and cinema for peer-review journals such as *Social Identities, Crossings, Interventions, Transnational Cinemas, Popular Communication, Television and New Media, International Journal of Cultural Studies, Postcolonial Studies* and *Communication, Culture & Critique.*

Ana Cristina Mendes is Associate Professor of English Studies at the School of Arts and Humanities of the University of Lisbon. Her research interests are visual culture, postcolonial theory, adaptation studies, and Victorian afterlives. She uses cultural and postcolonial studies to examine literary and screen texts (in particular, intermedia adaptations) as venues for resistant knowledge formations in order to expand upon theories of epistemic injustice. Her latest publications include the co-edited volumes *New Directions in Diaspora Studies* and *Transnational Cinema at the Borders*, and articles in *Studies in the Novel*, the *European Journal of English Studies, Postcolonial Studies*, and *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies.*

ORCID

Sandra Ponzanesi 🄳 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2085-1094
Ana Cristina Mendes 🄳 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3596-0701

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