

Statues Also Die - But Their Death is not the Final Word

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Abstract (E): Along with people like Césaire, Sartre and Howlett, Chris Marker cherished in 1953 the hope that African artefacts would be removed from the museum. In the film *Les Statues meurent aussi* ('Statues Also Die' 1950-53) Marker as director and writer, accompanied by Resnais as co-director, Ghislain Cloquet as cameraman and Guy Bernard as composer, took up the mission to challenge the prevailing gaze on African artefacts. How does Marker's *Les Statues meurent aussi* look upon African art?

Abstract (F): À l'instar de personnes comme Césaire, Sartre et Howlett, Chris Marker cultiva l'espoir en 1953 que les artefacts africains puissent sortir du strict cadre des musées. Dans le film *Les Statues meurent aussi* (1950-53), Marker, en tant que réalisateur et scénariste, secondé par Resnais, comme co-réalisateur, Ghislain Cloquet comme directeur de la photographie et Guy Bernard comme compositeur, se donna pour mission de contester le regard figé prédominant sur les artefacts africains. Quel regard porte sur l'art africain *Les statues meurent aussi* de Marker ?

keywords: Marker, Sartre, Mudimbe, Senghor, Cheick Anta Diop, Vautier, Resnais, Malraux, Benjamin, Aminata Traoré, Madeleine Rousseau, Présence Africaine, African contemporary art, African traditional art, mask, statue, universality-particularity, humanism, resistance, ethnologization, aestheticization, museologization, museum, Musée de l'Homme, Quai Branly.

Article

Museologization, ethnologization, aestheticization

The Museum gives us a false consciousness, a thief's conscience. We occasionally sense that these works were not intended to end up between these bare walls for the pleasure of Sunday strollers, for children on their free afternoon from school, or for Monday intellectuals. We sense vaguely that something has been lost and that these gatherings of old maids, this silence of the grave, and the respect of pygmies do not constitute the true milieu of art. (Merleau-Ponty 1973:72)

'[Présence Africaine] asked us for a film on black African art. Chris Marker and I have started our reflection with the following question: *why the black African art is located in the Musée de l'Homme,*

whereas the Greek or Egyptian is in the Louvre?’ This incentive question which Resnais formulates in an interview to René Vautier (1972:33) can be preceded by a preliminary question: *why in a museum at all?* The museum as a public institute in the modern era constitutes an important symbol of historical progression. Putting our artefacts at a distance, in buildings behind vitrines and transformed as commodities, makes our past tangible and visible as history. ‘A civilization leaves behind itself its mutilated traces like the pebbles dropped by Tom Thumb’. [*Image of a decapitated bust.*] (Quoted from voice-over in *Les statues* – “vo” from now on – which is spoken by Jean Négroni as the narrator and translated in English by the author.) Referring to these traces concretises evolution. When *les statues meurent*, they are put in shrines called museums.

When men are dead, they enter into History. When statues are death, they enter into art. This botany of death is what we call culture. [...] An object is death when the living glance trained upon it has disappeared [*images of heads without busts looking away*]. And when we disappear, our objects will be confined to the place where we send those of the blacks, to the museum (vo). [*Images of heads without bust looking straight to the spectator.*] [...] And then they die, in their turn. Classified, labelled, conserved in the ice of showcases and collections, they enter into the history of art (vo).

‘Those [objects] of the blacks.’ Weren’t they dead? Are they art after all? The eagerness to exhibit non-western artefacts, particularly around the last turn of the century of the past millennium, feeds the same modernistic *Weltanschauung* as the one carried out by the museum *tout court*: constructing primitivism to which western civilization can refer as a variation of western past existing in the present. The invention of the remote as past reinforces the idea of the west as developed. This idea of “knowledge of time” (Fabian 1983) constitutes, according to Volney (1830), an Archimedic point from which the present evolves that would be hopeless otherwise. “La violence irruptive du Temps” (Foucault 1973:132) makes from “the rest of the west” the relics of our own past. *Africa became our museum*. This shrine of the pre-modern was also ‘a nostalgic response to the loss of a common history’ (De Boeck 1996:144). The 19th century is *à la recherche du temps perdu* and finds in this “lost time” a satisfaction, liberation and fulfilment of its project. ‘The modern navigators only have one objective when they describe the customs of new peoples: to complete the history of man’ (La Pérouse 1930). Museums domesticate time. ‘Evolution, conquest and difference become signs of a theological, biological and anthropological destiny, and assign to things and beings both their natural slots and social mission’ (Mudimbe 1988:17). Unilinear evolutionism of the 19th century – a model that considered western civilization as its culmination point – produced in the first half of 20th century the idea that traditional civilizations which were considered to represent our past and not to emancipate themselves from their primitive stadium, were static and without history (Davidson 1999, Mudimbe 1992). *Africa became our eternal museum*.

We can now proceed questioning the second part of the motive that stimulated both directors in their creation: ‘*why in Musée de l’Homme, whereas the Greek or Egyptian is in the Louvre?*’ This question was already posed in 1920 by the “Bulletin de la vie artistique”: ‘*les Arts lointains iront-ils au Louvre?*’ The western museologization or museification of exotic artefacts from our *contemporary ancestors* (Adolf Bastian) was in that time not achieved in an art-museum like the Louvre, but in ethnographic museums like the *Musée de l’Homme* which is dependent on the national museum of natural history. Mudimbe elucidates: ‘[African artefacts] seem to be remnants [...] of absolute beginnings (1994:64). The ethnographic museum enterprise espoused a historical orientation, deepening the need for the memory of an archaic European civilization and, consequently, expounding reasons for decoding exotic and primitive objects as symbolic and contemporary signs of a Western antiquity’ (1994:61). The *ethnologization* of artefacts fits once again in the politics of putting at a distance: a categorization of otherness in order to define the self. Whereas museologization is a western stance that deals with alterity in time as history, ethnologization deals with it in space as distance (cf. Mudimbe 2008, Lévy-Strauss 1963: introduction). The combination of ‘ethnographic’ and ‘museum’ that assimilates African artefacts which are still attached to living people, points at the putting into the past of the distant. The imagery that museologization and ethnologization produces, appropriates the other as something primitive, barbarous or exotic. ‘Black art! We look at it as if it has its *raison d’être* in the pleasure it gives us. The intentions of the black who created it, the emotions of the black who looks at it, all of that escapes us’ (vo).

Parallel to the alienation by ethnologization – but half a century after the achievement of the film – artefacts got classified again by the museum when brought under the minimal denominator of “art”, ‘a notion contested by their origins’ (Guermann 2006:23). Without the need to evoke the discussion whether the attribution of aesthetic qualities to (African) worked objects implies that they are considered artistic (Cf. Galaverna 2002:5-9; Goodman 1996:59; Poissant 1994:9-10; Kant 1878; Schaeffer 1996), we can perceive the appropriation of artefacts as art, in museums like Quai Branly. A third part of the incentive question could thus only be added now: *why in Quai Branly?* What does this re-apprehension of a lost past mean? By the recognition of (projected) aesthetic qualities on them, African artefacts are degraded from the cultural to the cultural. Aestheticization buried them again (not even in Africa) as a false attempt to repair the “assassination” by ethnologization (cf. declarations of Aminata Traoré concerning Quai Branly on the net). ‘S’attacher à la seule forme, c’est considérer uniquement l’écorce, or celle-ci meurt, dès qu’elle est séparée de la sève qui la fait vivre’ (Porcile 1965:137). The museum’s “promotion” of “primitive” artefacts as art – in a period when primitivism as artistic trend was fully recognized – did not mean a revolution in the history of art if we consider its science as concerned with its own culture and historical space (Mudimbe 1994:61). History of Art promotes itself as a technique capable of analyzing and valuing its objects from within an artistic

tradition, relates to non western productions on an analogical basis, according to Goldwater (1986) and recuperates different aesthetics in its own history. Tied up with the museum's ethnologization, its aestheticization assimilates objects into its own grid. 'Viewers may now appreciate the formal properties of these objects, be attentive to their textures and shapes [...] and may even see how they prefigure and correspond to examples of modernist European sculpture and design. But have they come to life?' (König 2007; see also Price 1989). What Malraux described in *Les voix du silence* as a modern annexation of works from all times and all civilizations by the art world (*le musée imaginaire*) in order to give them the status of works of art, is further disputed by *Les statues* for this annexation being a form of ethnocentrism or even ethnocide. According to Marker – whose film was only published two years after Malraux' *Les voix du silence* – the annexation by the art scene does not, as Malraux considers, constitute a resurrection within the space of the museum, but a deadly recuperation (Zarader 2008).

Besides their dealing with their incentive question by bringing the camera inside the museum, the directors found an utmost manifestation of the museum's ethnologizing and aestheticizing gaze outside of the museum. The de-cultuating gaze is exemplified by Marker through his depiction of tourist art, defined by Jules-Rosette as 'art produced locally for consumption by outsiders' (1984:9). While images show a white man teaching Africans how to make their own objects with new tools, the voice-over states that '[...] black art becomes a dead language and what is born on his steps is the jargon of decadence. Its religious requirements are followed by commercial requirements. And given that the white is the buyer, given that demand outstrips supply, given that it is necessary to go fast, black art becomes indigenous handcraft. Ever more degraded replicas of the beautiful pictures invented by African culture are fabricated. Here, the village is vulgarized, the technique is impoverished. In the country where every form had its signification, where the gracefulness of a curve was a declaration of love to the world, one becomes accustomed to an art of bazaar' (vo). While abstract primitivism was in fashion in Europe, colonizers not only degraded traditional art into knickknacks and airport-art, but taught colonised representational art and art of portraits. 'Henceforth incapable of expressing the essential, the sculptor seeks after resemblance. We taught him not to carve farther than the tip of his nose' (vo). Tourist art is thus in total continuation of the western exhibitions which according to Benjamin 'created a framework in which [the] use-value receded into the background [...] and which glorified the exchange value of commodities' (1976:165, quoted in Arnaut 2009). Mudimbe closes: 'African tourist art and its contradictions [...] are just an *ad vallem* consequence of the process which [...] classified African artefacts according to the grid of Western thought and imagination, in which alterity is a negative category of the Same' (1988:12).

Marker's attempt to rehabilitate "African art"

*The whites already projected onto the blacks their own demons
as a way to purge themselves of them. (vo)*

Les Statues sheds a critical light on the ethno- & historiocentric western gaze. The film takes the dispossession and transformations of African artefacts as a heuristic model in order to understand the greater dynamics of the colonial gaze. This begins already in how the film depicts the museum after its opening on a dark screen. The first vitrines that the spectator sees after having identified with the position of the museum-goer, exhibits daily objects like a knife, stamp and broken umbrella. This detachedness, which refers to *Neue Sachlichkeit*, is complemented with surrealist configurations as could be seen in surrealists expositions of the thirties (fig.1). In *Les Statues*, surrealist and arbitrary categorization is emphasised by means of little cards depicting objects behind the vitrines, as for instance "utilitarian art" and "unknown origin". This ironic composition functions as a mirror deconstructing our subjective way of attributing meaning to otherness – *in casu* African artefacts – when applied to the Self.



Fig. 1: Exposition surréaliste de la Galerie Charles Ratton à Paris en 1936. (Courtesy of Toma Luntumbue Muteba)

This mirroring points at Marker's cinematographic strategy which is one of implication rather than communication (Odin, 1998:39). The *prise de conscience*, which is the aim of the strategy of implication, is continued in the shot right after the one of the vitrines. Now from the point of view of the African statue, we see gazes of curiosity, disdain and appreciation, but all of which we get a feeling of voyeurism. The subjectivity assigned to an African statue in a display case by attributing it a point of view is worked out by a jump cut to an animating gaze of a black woman museum visitor meeting the African statue. 'The contention that statues die once they are entombed in museums, no longer looked at as part of a living culture, is imaginatively reversed' (Lupton 2005:37).

The spectator's gaze is further altered as he becomes a traveller into a voyage, 'to a country where one goes by losing one's memory' (vo). When he, the traveller-spectator, leaves European shrines of African statues deprived from their cultural context and assimilated through museologization, he is firstly brought in touch with different maps of Africa. The variety of maps depicting each in a different way the very same continent does not only show the relativity of all representation and hence the historicity of them (and also of the film). It also gives back what Africa is deprived of; namely history. To counter the idea in which – according to for instance Hegel in his *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte* – Africa is a continent without history (1970:120), *Les Statues* gives a graphic insight of Africa's evolution by showing its shape on the map slowly unravelling through the 11th, 12th, 15th and 17th century. This all proceeds from a map depicting Africa as 'the fetus of the world' (vo) or 'le nombril du monde' as Sartre puts it (1948:584), the origin of the homo sapiens and *archè* of culture, which constitutes a 'common ground' for humanism to which Marker refers at the dénouement of the film. Marker is not alone in this quest for a 'common ground', which gave birth to several controversial studies on African source of universal culture. (Diop 1974; Nwokeji & Eltis 2002; Coon 1939; Snowden 1970; Evangelidou 1994; Onyewuenyi 1993) These quests of e.g. Cheick Anta Diop, do not only counter western representation in which Africa is denied of history, reason and values, but tries to offer the necessary commensurability that allows Marker's statement of similarity and equality towards the end of the film.

The travelogue continues after the spectator has been prepared by the maps of the continent. He is led through the relentlessness of untouched African desert and the heart of darkness in the jungle. However, this confirmation of European imagery is only set in order to reach its opposite: the revealing of African civilization. 'Once beyond deserts and forests, which he believed to be bordering on the kingdom of Satan, the traveller discovered nations, palaces' (vo). Although only constituting a belated and fictive gesture, it is from this moment on that the liveliness of the Negro-statues is re-established. A renaissance occurs thanks to the intelligent use of text and images. 'The film magically resurrects African art, using a fluid repertoire of zooms, pans and sharp cuts to show objects liberated

from their display case coffins and infused with life and movement' (Lupton 2005:37). The use of the "dispositif cinématographique" receives its full pertinence by its ability to imagine the 'wreckages' of African culture as a part of a whole from which those artefacts were torn, and its ability to attribute a narration to this whole, a time, a history. The editing links together isolated statues, thus giving the static objects a dynamic narrative force. Travel-shots between two statues of sphinxes evoke palaces and nations; nations are glorified by symmetrical images suggesting harmony; an icon of the bird suggests freedom; gifts generosity, static soldiers sovereignty; a scarified princess beauty; variety of musicians art. Solidarity and unity are suggested as well.

In these images, Marker does not show palaces ruined by conquest or nations enslaved by colonialism, but chooses for the imaginative in order to reanimate what was assassinated. His reanimation does not bring into focus the mutilation by museums. In stead, he reanimates – cinematographically – neglected and unknown memory, well knowing he cannot replace the statues in their natural context anymore. The travel-shots between two statues of sphinxes for instance, do not evoke the decline of Egyptian civilisation. On the contrary, this analogy between Negro-art and Egyptian culture evoked by this scene refers to Cheick Anta Diop's thesis in which he argued that ancient Egypt had been a Black African culture. Diop submitted his thesis at the University of Paris, the same period as the outset of *Les statues*. Parallel to the censorship of the film, the thesis was rejected. However, in 1955, the thesis was published as *Nations nègres et culture (Negro Nations and Culture)*. Présence Africaine, the patron of *Les statues*, published several of his books.

Because cinema is unable to restore the original gaze on African artefacts, it is said that the film becomes complicit to what it denounces. The film does not render the artefacts visible through their proper ontology but they remain mute. 'It could be said, says König, that in Resnais' film, we can't really see these objects or these people at all: we see chalice not cup, souvenir not prayer, portrait not death. [...] Acknowledging the statue's invisibility to us may make us feel better about our looking. But unfortunately, this gesture doesn't really allow the statue any more life than seeing it as a souvenir does [...]' (2007). Alter ties up with König. She asserts that 'Cinema, by its very nature, participates in [the process of mummification or transformation of everyday life into culture] by documenting and recording events, people, objects, the past, and the present and freezing them in a two-dimensional audiovisual verisimilitude' (Alter 2006:59). She evokes a similitude between museification and mortification processes of cinema, even when cinema tries to imbue inanimate objects with life. 'Should we perhaps not even view this film?' König asks herself. The film answers negatively. Alter asserts: 'Marker's films excel in calling attention to their own artifice and thereby encourage a self-reflexive questioning of what happens when life becomes celluloid' (2006:59). König continues: 'protest [...] ought not to take the form of a [...] voluntary perceptual disengagement from the world.'

‘Like the death mask, the film is not a screen to hide behind, but an object which renders visible death’s proximity, our complicity with and connectedness to it’ (2007).

In my reading of *Les Statues*, the film does not aim at evoking the original experience of African artefacts. My interpretation is thus opposite to Porcille’s assumption that the intentions of the filmmakers were to ‘replace the elements in the natural context’ (1965:137). Even if their intention would be the removal of statues from the museum, they considered them as uprooted in such a way that they could only rely on reanimation and not on a natural context. The removal from the museum is thus its replacement in the imaginative order of cinema or its metamorphosis in other forms of art (cf. infra). In the same line as Porcille, Zarader opposes Marker to Malraux, suggesting that *Les statues* feeds itself with a nostalgia for a living gaze on the artefacts in their natural context whereas Malraux contests in his *Le Musée imaginaire* the possibility to arouse this gaze again (2007:1-5). On the contrary, a modified gaze on African “art” and its power to adapt according to changing post- and neo-colonial contexts (cf. infra) are prefigured and put in practice by *Les statues* itself, by its re-imagination and reinvention of African art. *Les Statues* is strikingly close to the word *reprendre*, intended by Mudimbe (1994:154-208) as an image of the contemporary activity of African art that ‘takes up an interrupted tradition, not out of a desire for purity [...] but in a way that reflects the conditions of today’ (1994:154). The film is not satisfied with vainly trying to reproduce traditional meaning, but makes an attempt to project African art into the future. Contrary to what Zarader ascribes to the film, *Les Statues* does not content itself with empathy. This means that Marker is closer to Malraux, who thinks that the refusal of empathy grounds the possibility of metamorphosis, and to Benjamin, who thinks that the refusal of empathy grounds the possibility of redemption. In the last part of this contribution we will see that *Les Statues* attributes to the metamorphosis of African art a possibility of redemption.

In sharp tension with the images that construct ‘palaces and nations’ by means of cinematographic suggestion, Marker evokes through the voice-over colonial destruction of these palaces and nations; and of African art.

These great empires are now the deadest kingdoms of history. Contemporaries of Saint Louis, of Joan of Arc, they are more unknown to us than Sumer and Babylon. In the last century, the flames of conquerors turned this whole past into an absolute enigma. Black upon black, black battles in the night of time, the sinking has left us only with this beautiful striped wreckage which we interrogate. (vo)

[That] which gave sense and form to black art dissolves and disappears. It is the white who pretends to take on the role of the ancestors. The true statue for protection, exorcism and fecundity henceforth is his silhouette. Everything unites against black art. Caught in a pass

between Islam, enemy of the images, and Christianity, which burns idols, African culture collapses. [...] Temporal powers practice the same austerity. Everything that was a pretext for works of art is replaced. (vo)

But Marker is not satisfied with the commemoration of death, since the wreckages of cultural tradition constitute affirmative signs of evangelization and progression that colonialism brought to the developing world. The museum is a sign of the success of the *mission civilisatrice*. Death reaffirms the colonial stance of putting at a distance. It neglects new manifestations of African art and their possibilities of interaction or deconstruction. After showing us our familiarity with African figures, he states: ‘But this brotherhood in death is not enough for us. It is much closer to us that we are going to find the true black art, that which puzzles us’ (vo). It is about art which bewilders and confuses. Which art? Marker does not give the spectator a didactical explanation of African art in ethnographical categories nor aesthetic characteristics. In stead, he sheds a light on its ontological status (1) and its political power of resistance against racism and colonialism (2).

(1) What is African art outside of museums?

L'âme nègre doit sortir des musées (Howlett). Il faut qu'il retaille ce vêtement tout fait. La négritude est retrouvée (Sartre 1947).

Ethnographic museums appropriated African artefacts in order to assimilate them in a play of otherness and sameness, so that they speak to us as our contemporary history. The art museum assigns them aesthetic qualities, so that they speak to us as art. Marker for his part attributes them (not in form but in content) a “difference” which refuses to be reduced to a western gaze. Seemingly opposite to epistemological ethnocentrism and cultural eurocentrism that assigns meaning to everything from within its own conceptions, Marker attributes them alterity, despite the recognition of form: they look at us, but with void eyes.

These images ignore us [...] they are from another world [...] we have nothing to do in this gathering of ancestors who are not our ancestors. We want to see suffering, serenity, humor, when we know nothing. Colonizers of the world, we want everything to speak to us: the beast, the dead, the statues. And these statues are mute. They have mouths and don't speak. They have eyes and don't see us. (vo)

Nevertheless, Marker attributes meaning to them, inspired by Madeleine Rousseau (who is for her part inspired by Placide Tempels) amongst other critics of African art who figure in the opening credits of the film. His conception of African art is accompanied by a Sartrean conception of the human (Rousseau 1948:38). Marker actually states that African art outside the museum ‘is the sign of a lost unity where art was the guarantee of an agreement between man and world’ (vo). Meanings attributed to African artefacts in *Les Statues* can be seen as manifestations of the legacy of the negritude

movement, developed by Césaire, Senghor and Damas and with Sartre and *Présence Africaine* – the commissioner of the film – as its pre-eminent voices in France. According to Sartre’s interpretation of the idea expressed by the movement, the ultimate function of *l’art nègre* is to manifest *l’âme noire* (1948:524). Negritude is defined by Senghor as ‘the totality of cultural values of the black world’ (1959). Since they celebrate presence in reality and resist disenchantment, its manifestations represent ‘Being’: ‘L’être est noir’, states Sartre (1948:579). The African conception of “art” – which, according to *Les Statues*, figures in reality and daily life – is distinct from a common western conception of art in which art has its place outside daily life. Whereas the ‘value of the [western] artwork lies in its ability to solicit different kind of looking from its viewers’ (König, 2007) enhanced by a spatial distinction by e.g. the museum; African “art” is not separated from the world. Whereas a separation ‘allows [western art] to exist as an object of attentive perception’ (König, 2007); African art belongs to a cosmology of unity. More radically, Lupton asserts that ‘the film suggests that the Western reverence for art as a sphere separate from everyday life is a reflex designed to conceal the fact and the consequences of the death [of statues] (2005:38).

It is not very useful for us to call it “religious object” in a world where everything is religion, nor “artistic object” in a world where everything is art. Art here begins in the spoon and ends up in the statue. And it is the same art. [...] Hence, every object is sacred because every creation is sacred. It recalls the creation of the world and continues it. [...] This is the world of rigour; each thing has its place within it. [...] One realizes that this creation has no limits, that everything communicates. [...] Here, man is never separated from the world, the same strength nourishes every fibre. Those fibres, among which the most sacrilegious man, while lifting the Earth's skirt, has discovered... ..death. (vo)

L’âme nègre evokes invisibility while standing in the presence of reality. Both are not mutually exclusive: ‘The black statue is not the God, it is the prayer’ (vo). The mask also takes as object an important role in these semantics. The mask refers in its transparency to the invisible and fights against death. ‘It unveils what it wants to hide’ (vo). African statues and masks stand thus in relation to death: ‘they keep death at bay by bringing it closer’ (König 2007). They are no symbols of death but the celebration of it as the roots of life. ‘These roots flourish’ (vo). Death thrives. Statues and masks are not the memory of what was once living, but they negotiate life. The relation that African art has with death is a form of negotiation and is contrary to what Porcille states as an inability of African art of abstraction (1965:136).

Guardians of graves, sentinels of dead people, watchdogs of the invisible, these ancestors’ statues are not made for the cemetery. We put stones over our dead in order to prevent them from escaping. The black keeps them nearby to honour them and benefit from their power. [...] They are the roots of the living. And their eternal countenance takes, sometimes, the shape of a root. [...] These masks fight against death. [...] Because the familiarity with the

dead leads to the domestication of death [...], to the transmission of death, to the charming of death. [...] Prayer [...] connects earth to death, by means of shape and by means of matter. [...] [When death is given, the vital strength which is now freed] wanders. It will torment the living until it has taken on its former appearance. It is to this appearance that the blood of sacrifice is addressed. And it is this appearance that is fixed in these legendary metamorphoses in order to appease it until these winning faces are done repairing the fabric of the world. (vo)

(2) Political resistance

It is from its resistance to be appropriated within Sameness and its participation in history, that death does not have the final word on African art. It is from their relation to death, turning against destiny by their creation and testifying of the eternal struggle of human beings against Appearance and Time, that African manifestations of *l'âme noire* can become subversive. It is from their particularity and difference, participating in the universal without being deduced out of it, that statues are metamorphosed.

Sometimes, one says "no"! It is the black artist who says it. Then a new form of art shows up: the art of fighting. Art of transition for a period of transition. Art of the present time, between a lost grandeur and another to conquer. Art of the provisional, whose ambition is not to last, but to witness. [...Racism] drives the black artist into a new metamorphosis and, in the ring, or in an orchestra; his role consists in giving back the blows that his brother receives in the street. (vo)

The juxtaposition of images of art (which Marker rediscovers in the movements of a black athlete or the rhythms of a jazz drummer) with images of severe colonial exploitation (and instrumentalization of the African body), shows powerfully the fight of art against destiny, the resistance against mutilation of culture. The juxtaposition in the editing is transcended when the persistence of art is shown *within* the images of exploitation, together in one shot. Opposition culminates in deconstruction of archive images used in *Les Statues* depicting slavery and meant to demonstrate colonial achievements and western pride. The voice-over points at the dignity of blacks that figure in the images which *condition sine qua non* were exactly the denial of their dignity. The contradiction within the same image calls for the recognition of equality, which is prefigured in the workers' insurrection wherein blacks take part.

‘There would be nothing to prevent us from being together the inheritors of two pasts, if that equality could be refound in the present. At least it is prefigured by the only equality that is denied to no one ... that of repression’ (vo).

In repression, race struggle becomes class struggle. In the factories, the will to grasp the world that gave birth to African art is now transformed as the ability to appropriate means of production. ‘It is

always against death that one fights' (vo). *Les Statues* shows resemblances between industrial progression and African ritual activity. Marker does not denounce the modernization of Africa as Jean d'Yvoire puts it (1991:25), but sees in it possible means against alienation since it occurs from within African identity. It is not a matter of death of a civilization, as Porcille wants to put it (1965:136) but a civilization in evolution. The appropriation of the image by a black photographer, and thus the right of a proper worldview, is said to be a heritage of the sorcerer who captures images with his mirror and whose act counters the alienation of representations imposed upon them.

Denouement

Their history might be an enigma, but their shapes are not foreign to us. After the Frisians, the monsters, the helmeted Atrides of Benin, all the vestments of Greece over a people of a sect, here are their Apollos from Aifé, which strike us with a familiar language. And it is fair that the black feel pride about a civilization which is as old as ours. Our ancestors can look at each other face-to-face without looking down with empty eyes. [...] There is no rupture between African civilization and ours. Faces of black art fell off from the same human face, like snake's skin. Beyond their dead forms, we recognize this promise, common to all the great cultures, of a man who is victorious over the world. And, white or black, our future is made of this promise. (vo)

The common fight against destiny which is not bound to any culture, and the 'common ground' of history are united in the theme of the African art, which was the original brief by *Présence Africaine* and which evoked the rhetorical question by Resnais and Marker: 'Would there be an art made by primitive populations and another art made by evolved populations, two arts with a total different essence?' (Vautier 1972:34). The resemblance in form between African sculptures and masks and the human, function as the metaphor for universal ground amongst all cultures and brotherhood. The universality being the recognition of particularity gives to the issue of African statues a resonance on a human scale. The denouement constitutes the most anti-colonial statement of the film, as the denial of the rupture between two civilizations signifies the refusal of the fundament of colonial legitimation.

Madeleine Rousseau writes that 'the real encounter with Africa is firstly made through forms' (1994:37). One could suggest that the resemblance in form on which *Les Statues* focuses towards the end of the film and which would imply an encounter between Europe and Africa is yet another projection of sameness on difference and appropriation of otherness to the self. This would mean that the "promise" of African art is inscribed in the grid of western conceptions. However, this position confuses the artefact and its shape. Markers visual recognition of a form only points at resemblance – how culturally different its genesis might be. It is this recognition of particularity, which can be the sole possible universality.

Conclusion

J'ai regardé le film et je dois dire que je ne me suis même pas posé la question que c'est un film qui avait été fait en 1952. Pour moi, c'est un film d'actualité. C'est un film que je dirais d'avant-garde, c'est-à-dire, qui se projette dans le temps. [...] Moi je ne le connaissais pas avant, mais ça m'a fait un énorme plaisir, parce que au moins, ça m'a effacé une image du cinéma africain fait par les Européens. (Souleymane Cissé, in Imbert 2007 :71)

Marker counters the western conception of traditional objects, and substitutes its alterity by another in the first part of the film: he takes them as a manifestation of a different conception of art than ours. Their different ontology implies that their displacement into the museum did not bring them closer to us but paradoxically put them on a distance, deprived of their essence. They are 'stripped of their spiritual functions by being designated as "spiritual"', says König (2007). The 'living gaze' upon them that disappeared is indeed the one of the society in which the artefact had its place. Despite the difference of conception, these manifestations are said in the last part of the film to be recognizable to ours. The similarity in form is symbolised in the shape of the human face, bearing in it a moral appeal. This evolution of the film in which the postulation of a difference that cannot be recuperated and assimilated slides into a discourse of similarity and equality in which the acceptance is formulated of a common fate (Foucault 1984:70) seems remarkably concordant to the evolution of African thought from the movement of negritude of the thirties (in which the same antithetical difference is emphasised) towards the movement of for instance Cheick Anta Diop (in which a common process is proposed from which the western culture arose and which primarily confirms resemblance).

This movement is more specifically present in the fate that the film assigns to African art. The motive of the first part evokes the degradation from the cultural to the cultural and ultimately the 'death' of African statues by the museum whose only function is to 'remain witness to a "primitive" past' (Mudimbe 1994:61). The reasons for museologization were thus reflexive: as self-definition. In this sense, African artefacts were not marginal, but essential for the centre (Copans 1992, De Boeck 1996:145). For Mudimbe, this affirmation of otherness constitutes the negativity of a dialectics: the appropriation by the museum converts otherness to the self and to the imagination of the West. This is why *Les Statues* tries in the first part of the film to affirm and recognize the value of African artefacts *outside* of the museum or western imagination. One could make the reproach of for instance Geurmann (2006:24) that *Les Statues* only reverses colonial normative hierarchy by its simplistic esteem of African objects and caricatures of "the good black versus the bad white". By inverting colonial values the film would reproduce them without putting them at stake. However, the promise of

equality propagated towards the finishing of the film leads us once again to the dynamics of the film from recognition of black art and African values to a broader humanism. Within the legacy of the movement of negritude – and not, as Alter claims, ‘in sharp contrast with the popular appeal of negritude’ (2006:60) – *Les Statues* revalue what has been negated in order to claim its place in the universal. Bearing in mind that death of an object is understood by Marker as the disappearance of ‘the living gaze trained upon it’ (vo), his ultimately positive cinematographic restoration by means of a – irrevocably modified and renewed – gaze on artefacts are to be understood as a necessary phase of recognition without which there would be no valid criticism after all. Moreover, stating that such revaluation is simply a reversal of western hierarchy and is consequently tributary to western paradigm still reproduces the dualistic opposition of the other to the self, and remains thus in the mentioned paradigm.

However, besides this important revaluation, *Les Statues* evokes in its last part a turning point which procures the film a total different dialectic than a recuperating one – which is then rectified. The dialectic is now a liberating one that goes ‘from silence to promise’ (Payot 2009), wherein death has a constitutive function. Art – and precisely the one that stands in relation to, and resists death – transforms itself, as the film shows. The idea of African art propagated by *Les Statues* is also one of transformation, but now one in which art emerges out of its carcass to manifest itself in deconstructive forms. *Les Statues* thus goes further than suggested in Lupton’s description of the film, according to which it gives an ‘insight into the damaging cultural impact of colonialism and the consequences of imposing a white imperial gaze upon African art and culture’ (2005:36). *Les Statues* rather renders an account of Ulli Beiers conclusion. ‘It is no longer possible to look at African art and see nothing but a continuous and rapid process of disintegration. We can now see that African art has responded to the social and political upheavals that have taken place all over the continent. The African artist has refused to be fossilized’ (1968:14). Mudimbe writes: ‘This discontinuity, despite its violence, doesn’t necessarily mean the end of African art; it seems, rather, that the ancient models are being richly readapted’ (1994:163-4).

Les Statues thus transcends the static story in which any transformation of unchangeable African artefacts was unilaterally related to colonial intervention that kidnapped these artefacts and in doing so froze them even more. In 2008, *Les Statues* is described as following: ‘the authentic creations linked to the specificity of the pantheistic and magic cultures of these regions, particularly statues and masks, have been corrupted by colonialism’ (festival d’Angers, 2008:108). However, the film largely transcends the combination of exotism and pity that can be read in the description in the festival program. The film does not come to an end with an assessment of acculturation. The death of the artefact carries along something else than only the loss of an aura (Benjamin). The resurrection of

museologised art goes even further than metamorphosis *within* the museum as theorised by Malraux in his *Le Musée imaginaire*. *Les statues* rejects thus the monolithic idea that African art would be over with the death of its 'primitive' objects and rejects the allochronism of denial of coevalness (Fabian). This critique is still pertinent today: African art is still being associated with objects from the ethnographic museum whereby the representations they promote are put outside of time. *Les Statues* leaves this synchronistic vision on art of a determinate moment to consider it as changeable, in space as well as in time, while negotiating both space and time. Thereby the film transcends the dichotomy between the traditional and the modern on the one hand and between centre and periphery on the other. The transformative power that it attributes to African art encompasses the past, projects itself into the future and is universal. The film rejects the idea of contemporary black art being deviations of a more "authentic" art, and assigns – along with Spivak – a creative potential to hybridity which engenders new meanings and which counters the very idea of museologization (cf. Mampuya 2006). The domestication and destruction of African art does not constitute a finishing point but a frame that in its turn is negotiated by contemporary African art, which holds the promise that is formulated by Marker at the end of his film.

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