

This document is a work in progress and reflects ongoing discussions that converged in the context of a workshop convened by the Goethe-Institut Portugal at Culturgest in Lisbon between the 24th and 27th of September 2019. The workshop was part of the project „[Everything passes, except the past](#)“ that questions the way European countries deal with their colonial past and with the persistence of colonial power relations and its thriving algorithms. The Lisbon workshop brought together around twenty artists, filmmakers, scholars, archivists and representatives of institutions, from various backgrounds and different privileged contexts, to focus mainly on colonial archives. Despite the multiplicity of voices that characterised the workshop, many participants who contributed to this document felt a common urge to express a call for action & reflection for a decolonizing practice of archives holding film collections from colonial contexts. Thus, there is no single author of this document. We are also aware of sister manifestos and related initiatives that we either acknowledge or solidarise with: [Manifesto to liberate the image](#), [FIAF Declaration on Fair Use and Access](#), [CCAAA policy statement: Sharing of heritage](#), [ICA Principles of Access to Archives](#), [UNESCO endorsed Universal Declaration on Archives](#), [IASA Ethical Principles for Sound and Audiovisual Archives](#) & more.

Call for action & reflection on decolonising film archives

This call for action and reflection addresses all those engaged with running European institutions maintaining colonial film collections; archivists, directors, technicians, scholars, curators and political figures.

Today, the material documenting images, sounds, text, dance, gestures and life of colonised subjects and territories is primarily held in European archives, with little or no public catalogs. These archival materials are also evidence of the imbalanced power relations generated and perpetuated by colonialism. Continuing these troubling relations, access to these archives is rigidly controlled, limited or costly. This renders them inaccessible to people struggling to reclaim their countries' narratives and restore the collective memories erased or destroyed by centuries of colonial propaganda.

The word archive is deeply rooted in its Greek etymology as it derives from *archon*—leader, ruler, governor. The archive fuses the material and the architecture that safeguards it, to affirm and maintain power. The power of the archive is precisely that of disallowing people access to their own data. Therefore colonial archives continue to constitute colonialism and remain one of its onto-epistemological objects. Archival documents are instituted to legitimate and legalise expropriation, occupation, slavery and extractivism. Just as colonialism capitalised on lives, territories and resources, colonial film archives continue to generate audiovisual wealth from the imagery produced from that violence. *Postcolony* is used here to refer to territories, countries and communities once subjugated by European colonial rule and the ongoing structural fragilities inherent to their postcolonial condition.

Film, along with other lens based technologies, was further developed to serve state surveillance and warfare. It performed a seemingly *enlightened* protheses of a God-eye, manifesting the omnipresence and omniscience of the Western colonial project, ignorant of its blind spots. Anti-colonial struggles of the 20th Century were aware of this structural power of media and the need to hijack lens technologies and redirect them into countering colonial imaginaries.

For the structural decolonisation of European film archives, the reproducibility of the physical matter of film and digitalization pose specific problems as well as possibilities different from those of restituting plundered artefacts to the *postcolony*. Instead of returning an “authentic”, “original” object to a dispossessed community or looted location, the reproducible plasticity of film makes it more urgent to

open up a broader discussion about sharing and providing access. In the case of colonial film, restitution takes place with the allocation of resources to create an ecology of dialogue and sharing between European film archives, independent initiatives and state institutions of the postcolony.

This call for action and reflection on decolonising archives proposes the following acts to those engaged with institutions holding colonial collections and invites them to reflect on their archival systems and practices:

ACT 1. CALL FOR DIALOGUE AS DECOLONIZING PROCESS

The decolonisation of colonial film archives requires specific processes that can only be initiated in dialogue with those representing archive holding institutions and those subjected to the objectification of colonial violence.

This dialogue should take place between independent actors and representatives of institutions, civil society and cultural policy and address the access, usage, redistribution, restitution, reproduction, digitalisation, dissemination and shared heritage of archived colonial film material.

Learning from subjective agencies and recognising that colonial relations are places of intergenerational trauma can be important facets to inform these processes. The differing institutional models and contexts require equally different tasks for decolonisation.

ACT 2. CALL FOR ALLOCATION OF RESOURCES AND ACCESS

To enable the above mentioned dialogue, European archives should provide permanent resources to finance and organise the sharing of their collections with artists, activists, filmmakers, researchers and other interested parties, particularly those from former colonised countries.

Resources for access and research should be part of a structural change towards decolonisation. Ideally, this would include research grants for projects that work with the archives and also contribute to structural changes.

European archives should invest in liberating their collections from copyright restrictions and create comprehensive catalogue listings and make these easily accessible.

ACT 3. CALL FOR SUPPORT OF ARCHIVE PRACTICES AND STRUCTURES IN THE POSTCOLONY

European archive institutions should embrace transnational responsibility and work to rectify the imbalanced power relations with archive structures and archival initiatives in the *postcolony*. The structures and bureaucracy of the Colonial era impeded the establishment and maintenance of functional archives, with ongoing impacts.

Often, the most critical and relevant archival practices are initiatives of individuals, independent actors and civil society working to recuperate, maintain and activate instabile or fragile materials.

European archive institutions should support infrastructure to, independently establish archive facilities for the preservation, digitisation and dissemination of colonial or anti-colonial film material in the *postcolony*.

ACT 4. CALL FOR CODES OF CONDUCT

As a result of above mentioned actions, codes of conduct should be put into place for the handling and usage of the material to prevent the reproduction and reification of colonial, racist or gender violence.

These codes of conduct should focus on a practice of decolonizing access, search criteria, captions, synopsis and tagging of archive material, without erasing the former models that reflect the cultural codes informing the construction of coloniality.

Each archive structure should develop a specific code of conduct that is kept open for permanent revision and renegotiation by those working in the archive as an ethical form of mutual collaboration.

CONCLUSION

The decolonisation of film archives can never be initiated without including the subject once rendered an object of cinematographic extraction in its process. Simultaneously, processes of decolonisation are never to be accomplished tasks but conditions to be inhabited. To return the subject back to the archive also means to embrace other forms of cognition and knowledge production such as vivid subjectivity, emotion and affect. Rather than remaining a site of power, a decolonized archive chooses to be a place for empowerment.

First signatories (names in alphabetic order)

1. Antje Van Wichelen
2. Catarina Simão
3. Corinna Lawrenz
4. Daniel Blaufuks
5. Diana McCarty
6. Didi Cheeka
7. Filipa César
8. Fradique
9. Ganza Buroko
10. Inadelso Cossa
11. Inês Beleza Barreiros
12. Inês Ponte
13. Julia Klein
14. Maria do Carmo Piçarra
15. Raquel Schefer
16. Sana na N'Hada
17. Stefanie Schulte Strathaus
18. Susanne Sporrer
19. Tamer El Said
20. Teresa Althen
21. Tom Rice
22. Wolfgang Fuhrmann
23. Yaa Addae Nantwi