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Towards a caring gaze: aesthetics of decolonization in Sarah Maldoror's *Sambizanga*

Em direção a um olhar atento: estética de descolonização em Sambizanga de Sarah Maldoror

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Abstract

The current artistic and academic interest in the archive of militant cinemas within the contemporary discourse on the urgency of decolonization is the starting point for this analysis of Sarah Maldoror's first feature *Sambizanga* (1972). Set right on the brink of the beginning of the armed struggle for independence in Angola in 1961, the film focuses on a woman's search for her imprisoned husband and "the time it takes to march" (Evan 1973). This essay aims at showing how Maldoror develops a unique way of seeing in *Sambizanga* that seems to have the potential to open up what Achille Mbembe (2017) calls "the dungeon of appearances," by telling a story of the process of leaving the "dark night" of colonialism (Fanon 1963, Andrade and Ollivier 1971, Mbembe 2021). By reading the film's decolonial aesthetics in dialogue with Fanon's theory of decolonization, and with reference to Mbembe and Kara Keeling, I trace the aesthetic approach to decolonizing temporality and visibility, bringing to the fore the argument that Maldoror achieves nothing less than what I

would like to call a *caring gaze*, which seems to extend the logic of representation and recognition (by international audiences), and instead can be seen as a work of repair.

Keywords
Sarah Maldoror | Frantz Fanon | decolonial aesthetics | care | militant cinema

Resumo

O atual interesse artístico e académico pelo arquivo dos cinemas militantes como parte do discurso contemporâneo sobre a urgência da descolonização é o ponto de partida para esta análise da primeira longa-metragem de Sarah Maldoror, *Sambizanga* (1972). Rodado imediatamente antes do início da luta armada pela independência de Angola, em 1961, o filme centra-se na procura de uma mulher pelo seu marido, que foi preso, e "o tempo que leva para marchar/caminhar" (Evan 1973). Neste artigo desvelo como Maldoror, em *Sambizanga*, desenvolve um "modo de ver" único, que parece ter o potencial de abrir o que Achille Mbembe na *Crítica da Razão Negra* (2017) denomina de "masmorra de aparências", ao desvelar a história do processo de saída da "noite escura" do colonialismo (Fanon 1963, Andrade 1971, Mbembe 2021). Ao abordar a estética decolonial do filme em diálogo com a teoria da descolonização de Fanon, bem como Mbembe e Kara Keeling, traço a abordagem estética de Maldoror de descolonização da temporalidade e da visualidade, sustentando o argumento de que o filme cria o que designo de um olhar atencioso, que vai além da lógica da representação e do reconhecimento (por uma audiência internacional), podendo ser considerado como uma obra de reparação.

Palavras-chave
Sarah Maldoror | Frantz Fanon | estética decolonial | cuidado | cinema-militante

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Introduction

With her fiction film *Sambizanga*[1] (1972), Sarah Maldoror (1929–2020) was aiming to bring the "forgotten wars" (Evan 1973) in Lusophone Africa to international attention, especially to European and North-American audiences. While committed to militant cinema's practice of turning the camera into a weapon, in *Sambizanga* she refrained from showing the war, neither the guerrilla warfare nor the extreme atrocities committed by the Portuguese, but instead went back to the time right before the beginning of the armed struggle for independence in Angola in 1961. However, Maldoror understood the camera as the most adequate tool to raise political awareness (Pfaff 1988). By foregrounding the conditions of everyday life under colonial rule in *Sambizanga*, she expands the notion of war.[2] But even more, she manages to link the image movements of cinema with the actions of political movements and thereby to overcome oppressive images/imaginations (Metschl 2018). In this essay I want to look at *Sambizanga's* aesthetics precisely to understand how the film not only puts forth the ideas of decolonization but at the same time realizes them aesthetically — despite the ambivalences of making a militant film for an international (Western) audience.

I therefore discuss the film against the backdrop of the current theoretical, political, artistic discourse on decolonization, with its turn to the archive of cinematic liberation struggles.[3] Within this archive of tricontinental militant cinemas *Sambizanga* stands out for several reasons: it is not only the first African feature film finished and released by a female director, but it also takes a women's perspective. Maldoror herself had close ties with the Lusophone freedom struggles, not only with her companion Mário Pinto de Andrade, Angolan poet and co-founder of the Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA), who was also crucial for the realization of *Sambizanga*,[4] and whom she met together with Amilcar Cabral and other poets / political leaders at Présence Africaine in Paris around the time when Maspéro Press had published Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* (1961) by Maspéro press at *Présence Africaine* in Paris (*Interview with Sarah Maldoror*, 2017, 10:30–11.30).

1 *Sambizanga* is Maldodor's third film as a director and also the third dedicated to the Lusophone freedom struggles. In 1969 she made the short film *Monangambée* in Algeria, based on a short story by Luandino Vieira, and in 1971 she shot the part documentary, part fiction film *Fusils pour Banta* in Guinea-Bissau on the role of women in the armed struggle. This film was produced by PAIGC, MPLA and FRELIMO, funded by the Algerian FLN and shot on 35 mm with a French Crew. However, the film was never finished due to a disagreement between the Algerian Army and Maldoror, and the material is lost (Pfaff 1988). The artistic research by Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc (in cooperation with Maldoror) on the film resulted in the semi-fictional documentary *Préface* à *des fusils pour Banta* (2011), in which he reconstructs the production of the film. For information on the production of *Sambizanga* and her other films see also Piçarra (2021).

2 See also Justine Malle's *Interview with Sarah Maldoror* (2017).

3 I refer here especially to the special issue of *Third Text* "The militant image," edited by Kodwo Eshun and Ros Gray (2011, 3), in which the editors explicitly understand the militant image as "a form of newness that is distinct from that of contemporaneity," rather militant filmmaking practices "actualized the potentialities of the visible and the audible against the odds."

4 In a letter from August 1971, Sarah Maldoror writes to Andrade during the preparation of the film's production that she cannot begin without him and that she needs his help. Foundation Mário Soares. Fund Mário Pinto de Andrade, Folder: 04333.001.011. I am grateful to the editors of this issue for bringing this letter to my attention.

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Unlike many militant films of the African independence struggles,[5] there are no direct references to Fanon or his thinking in Maldoror's film. Nevertheless, there seems to be a thread running through the film that allows Maldoror's artistic / aesthetic approach to decolonization to be brought together with Fanon's theory of decolonization. As I want to show, both share the notion of decolonization as community building and a politics of care (Mbembe 2021, Goldberg 2018), issues that regain attention in current social justice debates that address questions of care, repair and the need for decolonization. But even more, decolonization can be understood as a historical process of not only entering time but also overcoming racialization. In her film, Maldoror achieves both, by showing us "the time it takes to march" (Evan 1973) — focusing on the march of a woman, Maria, in search of her detained and then incarcerated husband, Domingos, and thereby stressing the importance of women's participation in the liberation movement.[6]

But the film moves us further, driven by the urgency to leave the "heavy darkness" (Fanon 1963, 311) it ends with the announcement of the first militant strike by the MPLA on February 4, 1961, about which de Andrade (1971, 153) writes: "The militants of the M.P.L.A., who at dawn on 4 February 1961 stormed the prisons of Luanda, triumphed, in the end, over the colonial night that once enveloped the Angolan people." It is this opening up of a future, by opposing "the play of repetition without difference and the forces that since the time of servitude had sought to deplete or put an end to the duration of time" and creating "their own time" (Mbembe 2021, 224), which allows for this analysis of *Sambizanga* by bringing it in dialogue with Fanon (with the help of Achille Mbembe and Kara Keeling). By focusing on the film's treatment of temporality and visibility I aim to show that *Sambizanga*'s decolonial aesthetics establishes what I call a *caring gaze*, which reworks the visual and temporal regime of racialization.

Sambizanga

Sambizanga is the adaptation of a novella by the white Angolan author Luandino Vieira: *The true life of Domingos Xavier* (1961). The story is based on Vieira's experiences working at the construction of a dam in 1959, when he was arrested by the Polícia

5 References to Fanon can be found in Glauber Rocha's (2014/1965) manifesto "Aesthetics of Hunger" as well as in Octavio Getino and Ernesto Solanas's film *La Hora de los Hornos* (1968), as well as in their subsequent manifesto "Towards a Third Cinema" (1969). Even more, *Battaglia di Algeri* (1966) by Gillo Pontecorvo, to which Maldoror contributed as assistant director, seems to translate crucial parts of Fanon's anticolonial thinking in *The Wretched of the Earth* to the screen (Stam 2003, 27). A recent example would be Hugo Göran Olsson's *Concerning Violence: 9 Scenes from Anti-Imperialist Self-defense* (2014), which compiles film material the director found in the archives of Swedish public television that was recorded and broadcasted in solidarity with Sub-Saharan independence movements, with excerpts from Fanon's book. This film, using material from *En Nations Födelse* (1973) by Lennart Malmer and Ingela Romare (among others), also puts a strong focus on the Lusophone struggles of independence.

6 Fanon famously wrote about women in the Algerian revolution in his essay "Algeria unveiled." This essay been criticized by many feminists throughout the years; we should not forget that he focused almost exclusively on the relationship between the male colonizer and the male colonized. For a critique of the essay within his writings, see Isaac Julian's film *Frantz Fanon: Black Skin, White Masks* (1995), in which Stuart Hall, Françoise Vergès, as well as former comrades, comment on the text.

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Internacional de Defesa do Estado (PIDE), the Portuguese secret political police, and held for four months (Gugler 1999, 81). Sarah Maldoror wrote the script together with de Andrade and the French author Maurice Pons. It was shot in the outskirts of Brazzaville in the People's Republic of Congo, with a predominantly French crew and a cast that was recruited mainly from freedom fighters of the MPLA and the Guinean independence movement, Partido Africano para a Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde (PAIGC) (Pfaff 1988, 207). Unlike the novella, the film's narrative is structured around Maria as the leading character.

After Domingos is taken by the secret police, her neighbors tell Maria to go to the police station and to cry and shout until Domingos is released. Maria then sets off with her small child on her search for her husband. While at first the sequence of her search is cross-cut with Domingos's arrest, later, after a small boy observes his arrival at the prison and informs his grandfather, who is part of the clandestine liberation movement, the militants also begin to look for the unknown prisoner. From then on the film tells the story in parallel strands. The search, Maria's as well as the movement's, is interrupted by scenes showing Domingos being tortured in prison until he finally dies from his injuries. After Maria learns about Domingos's death and breaks down crying and screaming in front of the prison, the members of the movement find her and take care of her. The last sequence shows a party with a live band (Ngola Ritmos) playing, at which the militants gather.[7] When the news of Domingos's death arrive, the camera slowly moves across the faces of the militants capturing their grief. It takes some time for the message to process, but then one fighter steps up on the stage interrupting the band and proclaiming: "Do not cry over his death! Today Domingos begins his real life in the hearts of the Angolan People"[8] (*Sambizanga*, 1972, 1:37:40–1:38:25). Then, the dance continues. The film ends with the short scene in which the date marking the beginning of the armed struggle is announced: February 4, 1961.[9]

Undoing colonial temporality and visibility: Maria's search

Starting from Maldoror's concern for duration, pace, or rhythm by stressing "the time it takes to march" my reading of *Sambizanga* will focus on how she links the temporality of the film not only with entering History, but, with reference to the readings of Fanon by Mbembe and Keeling, with the quest to undo racialized visibility.

7 On the importance of sound in *Sambizanga* see Moorman 2021.

8 I quote the English subtitles of the film (from the copy of the New York Public Library), in which all actors speak in their respective languages (Pfaff 1988, 207), which implicitly also points to the fact that the film addressed the Western / European market / audience while at the same time realizing a "redistribution of languages"; Mbembe (2021, 224) describes how speaking different languages was part of decolonization struggles.

9 On February 4, 1961 militants of the MPLA attacked civilian and military prisons in Luanda to free political prisoners. The importance of this event can be traced in Andrade's writings who described it on many occasions together with the uprising of March 15, 1961, which marks the beginning of the armed struggle (Andrade 1962). For a socio-economical study of Angola's war of liberation (until 1970) see Andrade and Ollivier (1971).

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Maldoror mediates the duration of Maria's search in long sequences. Long shots, in which we see Maria on the road, are alternated with many short close-ups of her face, music is added, the song addresses the long way. Watching these scenes, we can observe how Maria's consciousness is starting to be raised — and with it the rise of the movement. In her reading of *Sambizanga*, Sheila Petty discusses the staging of Maria against the backdrop of the criticism that the film was stylistically too close to Hollywood. Convincingly, she points out that Maldoror, in her use of close-ups of Maria during the first part of her journey to Luanda, avoids objectifying Maria by framing her close-ups in three-quarters profile, which allows for a certain psychological intimacy, while still respecting Maria's personal social space (Petty 1996, 79–80). Throughout the film, Maldoror uses close-ups to show emotions and thought processes unfolding on the faces of Maria, Domingos, and the movement, but also, as I will show in the next section, the affective bond that links them together and creates a sense of mutual care.

Maria's departure begins with a short scene in which her neighbors accompany her out of the village, until she continues alone with her son on her back. The next scene then opens with a long shot of the road; only after a few seconds, Maria slowly enters the image, staying at the margin of the road as well as the frame. In addition to the inner-diegetic sound — the chirping of crickets as well as Maria's steps on the ground — extra-diegetic music is slowly faded in. The slow rhythm of the song correlates with Maria's pace and is also taken up by the rhythm of montage. Consequently, I would argue, Maldoror, with her aesthetic decision to focus on the time of Maria's journey, rejects colonial temporality as well as colonial visibility: although she tells the story in a rather linear manner, the montage is far from economical; instead *Sambizanga* exposes the audience to the duration of the search, which takes up about half of the film's length. Only in the end, when the sequence of the party begins, does the rhythm of the images and the music gather speed, and is transformed into dance.

The colonial condition was marked by the production of temporal difference, in which Africa and its peoples are figured as "outside of time" (McClintock 1997). This negation of time positioned the colonized as without and outside of history but also not capable of a future. This colonial notion also entails that the colonized have no capacity for change or creation. Instead, the temporality of the colonial condition can be described as "native time," that is "repetition without difference" (Mbembe 2015).

In *The Wretched of the Earth* as well as in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon has defined the colonized existence in temporal terms. The Black experience is structured by racialization — that is, the being of the Black is hindered by the visibility of Blackness. This racist classification captures the racialized in a silhouette, in ascribed appearances, which structure the perception (Mbembe 2017). In a different passage, Mbembe (2017, 2) describes the "imprisonment in the dungeon of appearances" in further detail; it contains imaginary as well as material aspects, such as the deprivation of rights and objectification, which turned peoples of African descent for the purpose of the "Atlantic

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slave trade (from the fifteenth through the nineteenth century), through which men and women from Africa were transformed into human-objects, human-commodities, human-money" (ibid.).

As Keeling (2007) has argued in her reading of Fanon, past colonial images and narratives constantly dilute the perception of the present and turn the Black person into a cliché. In this situation a vicious circle emerges, in which the present is a constant repetition of the past, and which seems closed for the time being:

> There is no possibility of a conception of a future that could be different from the colonial past. Although this circuit is always only artificially and tenuously closed, for the living being who is recognized a priori as black according to a collective conception of blackness, the present is simply affect, a sensory perception that is the arrested action of the past on the present (Keeling 2007, 33).

Therefore, by reading Mbembe through Keeling's lense his description of the "dungeon of appearances" can also be understood as a temporal one: "The past traumas of colonization and slavery continue to affect and shape the present at the expense of the Black's future liberation" (Keeling 2007, 35). By looking at the notion of waiting in *Black Skin, White Masks* we can more fully understand this linkage between colonial visibility and temporality: "And in one sense, if I were asked for a definition of myself, I would say that I am one who waits" (Fanon 2008, 91). In this self-description, the waiting becomes, as Keeling argues, the condition of the existence in an interval: "For the one who waits (the black), colonialism in general, like now, is an interval punctuated by a hellish cycle of appearances in which one must survive" (Keeling 2007, 38). Under these conditions the only option left for the Black is to explode (Keeling 2007; Fanon 2008).

Keeling distinguishes between two kinds of explosions: the explosion of the Black, which is the last resort from the "racial epidermal schema" (Fanon 2008, 84), but does not lead to a break from the vicious circle; and the explosion that is an impossible possibility present in the interval and describes the liberation or rather the violence of decolonization, which possibly interrupts or destroys the interval *and* the temporality of colonial visibility (Keeling 2007). The explosion that is decolonization aims at introducing the future and thereby at creating the New Man. For Fanon "decolonization is always a violent event," which enables "the substitution of one 'species' of mankind by another" (Fanon 2004, 1). As Mbembe (2015) has pointed out:

> (...) the Latin term 'species' derives from a root [*specere*] signifying "to look," "to see." It means "appearance," or "vision." It can also mean "aspect." The same root is found in the term *speculum*, which means 'mirror'; or 'spectrum,' which means 'image'; in 'specimen' which means 'sign,' and 'spectaculum,' which refers to 'spectacle.'

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Therefore, the new species "is a new category of 'men' [...] no longer limited or predetermined by their appearance, and whose essence coincides with their image — their image not as something separate from them" (ibid.). This also means that the racist image which has defined the silhouette or the image of the colonized no longer determines her being "insofar as there is no gap between this image and the recognition of oneself, the property of oneself" (ibid.). Or, as Fanon writes: "'Negroes' are in the process of disappearing, since those who created them are witnessing the demise of their economic and cultural supremacy" (2004, 169). Thus, decolonization aims first and foremost at appropriating the self as person:

> Decolonization never goes unnoticed, for it focuses on and fundamentally alters being, and transforms the spectator crushed to a nonessential state into a privileged actor, captured in a virtually grandiose fashion by the spotlight of History. It infuses a new rhythm, specific to a new generation of men, with a new language and a new humanity. Decolonization is truly the creation of new men. But such a creation cannot be attributed to a supernatural power: The 'thing' colonized becomes a man through the very process of liberation (Fanon 2004, 2).

This process needs time, in two counts: as entry into time — and thus into History (understood as capacity of a past and a future) — and as duration (Mbembe 2015). In the quote, Fanon describes the new rhythm, which is introduced by this new species. This rhythm replaces the colonial situation — the interval as described by Keeling. The permanent repetition of the past is replaced by the rhythm, which enables the entering into time as departure and duration.

In *Sambizanga*, this duration is addressed aesthetically and is united with the rhythm (of Maria's search as well as of the images), which on the narrative plane is linked with entering into History. However, the violence — neither the one the colonized direct towards themselves in the colonial situation (Goldberg 2018), nor the decolonial — is shown. Instead Maldoror focuses on showing the relationships — between Domingos, Maria, and their child (in the beautiful scene before Domingos's arrest), between Maria and her neighbors, between the different members of the liberation movement — as driven by mutual care and love. Nevertheless, *Sambizanga* shows the creation of consciousness as a spatio-temporal process of formation. With reference to Fanon, this could be described as the threshold to the first phase of the struggle that at the end of the film, with the party, finally begins. This phase, Fanon (2004, 83) writes, is characterized by a "state of genuine collective ecstasy":

> On their continuing road to self-discovery the people legislate and claim their sovereignty. [...] The villages witness a permanent display of spectacular generosity and disarming kindness, and an unquestioned determination to die for the 'cause.' All of this is reminiscent of

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> a religious brotherhood, a church, or a mystical doctrine. No part of the indigenous population can remain indifferent to this new rhythm, which drives the nation (2004, 84).

Maria's first tentative, later increasingly determined departure from the village, her persistent journey through the land to the capital, and her crying and screaming at the different police stations and prisons with which she raises her voice against the colonial power, shows this new rhythm in its emergence. The audience witnesses the coming into being of her agency, her subjectivation as well as her growing bond with the movement, by which Domingos is also held. Maldoror's emphasis of the "making of community" (Mbembe 2021, 229) not only on a narrative level, but also aesthetically, comes into view more fully when turning to the scenes in the prison, when the camera shows Domingos's Black body in its vulnerability and relationality.

Visibility and Vulnerability: Resisting torture

In a short scene at the beginning of the film, Domingos talks to a white engineer at work at a construction site. Ultimately, he dies due to the injuries brought on him by the torture because he didn't reveal the name of this white man. While Domingos is beaten during his arrest and the trip to the prison, the torture only begins in the last third of the film, after Maria's arrival in Luanda. Her search thus becomes a race against time, which she loses eventually. When she arrives at the right prison, Domingos is already dead. I focus here on the colonial technology of torture and how it is staged in *Sambizanga* to show that not only does Domingos resist the power imposed on him, but the camera also seems to resist the racialized violence.

Torture aims to prevent an anticipated future by extorting information. The one who is tortured is excluded from the protection of rights. Torture is not so much about the clearing-up of a crime but the preventative construction or destruction of action options. Therefore, torture is both a "machine to produce the future" as well as "a machine to prevent the future" (Görling 2011, 32).[10] It accepts that the tortured subject is exposed to arbitrariness and transforms the "potentiality of vulnerability" into a "reality of violation/injury" (ibid.). Reinhold Görling (2013, 101) further states:

> By inflicting pain and harm through violent force on the body, the senses, and the affects of the other, there is an attempt to rob the other of any space for counter-staging. The victim is supposed to be a mere object, the perpetrator the only subject with agency.

The two torture scenes in *Sambizanga*, however, by focusing on Domingos's agency, reveal his resistance to this attempt.

10 This and all translations from German into English by the author.

Unlike Fanon's (2004, 3) famous description of the colonial world as "a world divided in two", the film does not allocate Blacks and whites, colonized and colonizers into strictly separate spaces.[11] Rather it shows the integration of the Angolan people into the security apparatus of the Portuguese colonial administration.[12] Black officers can be found on all levels of the hierarchy, even though the camera captures their inner conflict. The first scene starts as an interrogation. Domingos is brought into the questioning room by the guard, the door to the hallway stays open, the guard waits outside of the small room and observes the scene. A Black uniformed officer starts the interrogation by lying to Domingos: he tells him his wife is waiting outside, and if he would admit and sign everything, he could be reunited with her. With the beginning of the interrogation the camera angle changes first into a medium shot, then into close-up, and pans and cuts between Domingos's face and the officer's face. Only when the Black officer says that he is starting to get angry, the white officer enters the action (until then he was sitting behind his desk also observing). The white officer's job is to articulate the rage, first in racist, dehumanizing taunts. During this verbal abuse the camera moves closer towards Domingos's face and body. At one point it gets so close that the frame only shows his eyes and therefore his gaze. When he refuses to give evidence, the camera zooms out and his whole face comes into view. A witness is brought in, but when Domingos still refuses to talk, the beating begins. The blows are also filmed from a very close distance: first we see the beating arms of the white officer, then Domingos's body receiving them laying on the ground. While the body of the white policeman appears fragmented in these shots, the unity of Domingos's body is stressed. In the end Domingos is lying injured on the ground, while the officers leave the room, instructing the guard not to provide food or water as long he remains silent.

Before the second torture scene begins, a short scene shows Domingos in solitary confinement. He receives a smuggled note, which encourages him to persevere. Then Domingos is once again brought into the interrogation room, standing upright in front of the Black policeman. But this time the tone is rougher; the white officer hits him in order to make him talk. The camera focuses on the faces, we see the result of the beating. Domingos, now on the ground, repeatedly tries to get back up, but each time the white officer kicks him. Blood comes out of his mouth when the Black policeman hands a beating weapon to his colleague. The scene ends with a close-up of the guard's face, giving away his affliction by the torture.

11 In one scene the tailor Mussunda, (*Sambizanga* 1972, 1:01:40-1:03:30), a leading member of the independence movement, explains that the division is not between black and white but between the exploiters and exploited (see also Maldoror 1997, 212). This remark refers directly to the ideology of the MPLA, as Alice Breitmeyer (2014) has argued.

12 Maldoror states that she was "faithful to the novel." She explains, "When he [Vieira] had a white engineer who helped the blacks, or a mulatto who was a torturer, I respected the story. Naturally in making a film you have a political option. I make a film according to my political ideas. I made the choice when I picked the novel to film" (Maldoror in Pfaff 1988, 207).

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Despite the stark brutality of the scene, the violence enacted remains useless. Domingos resists the torture in silence, which affirms his agency. Fanon (2004, 221) writes about the possibility of resistance under torture:

> As soon as you and your fellow men are cut down like dogs there is no other solution but to use every means available to reestablish your weight as a human being. [...] Then there is this deathly silence–the body of course cries out–the silence that suffocates the torturer.

In the scene, Domingos's silence is tied with the shots, which show his determined passivity, his gaze, his refusal to say anything, as well as his contorted body, which he cannot protect against the strokes and kicks. The camera focuses on Domingos's vulnerability, his precariousness and thus on his humanity (Butler 2004), thereby defying the de-humanizing violence of torture aesthetically.

The smuggled message as well as the crosscut search of Maria and the militants, and finally the close-up of the Black guard's face, unites Domingos with the collective, instead of destroying the tie. The torture scenes convey the notion that resistance against colonial violence cannot be stopped, "while the nation is set in motion, while man both demands and claims his infinite humanity" (Fanon 2004, 221).

The focus lies on Domingos's body, which despite its increasingly wounded surface, tries to defy the violence. The views of his body in front of an audience in the interrogation room, as well as in the theater, links Domingos's injured and vulnerable body with the bodies of the viewers, who not only realize their own vulnerability, but also relate themselves empathically (or even identify themselves) with Domingos (Bee 2011, 208). This affective binding is supported by the close-up showing the guard's face. Throughout the film the use of close-ups works to establish this bond — not necessarily in a way that seeks identification and through suture, but rather as a means for igniting solidarity. However, what the scenes mediate is that the process of becoming conscious is a collective one. This can be seen even more clearly in the scene of Domingos's death in the communal cell.

This scene, even more than in the torture scenes, provides the stage on which Domingos's wounded body becomes an image of vulnerability, mortality, and thus humanity, which is especially due to the way his imprisoned comrades hold him and comfort him until he finally dies. It is only then that their bodies rise, while singing a song in honor of his life. This uprising motion of the inmates at the end of the scene evokes Fanon's description of a "brotherhood" or "church." Moving between the fellow prisoners and Domingos's dead, wounded body, the camera again connects the audience affectively to the scene.

Immediately when the song comes to an end, extra-diegetic sound, the song accentuating Maria's search, starts up. In the montage we first see the prison courtyard, then Maria comes into view. Slowly she leaves the prison; only when she reaches the

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street does she break down, cry, and wail. Militants present at the scene quickly come to catch and hold her, to take care of her, and grieve with her. The prisoner's song and Maria's screaming are linked on the auditory plane; it is the collective care of the movement — towards Domingos as well as towards Maria – which holds both scenes together.

Modes of recognition: Towards a *visual politics of care*

According to Judith Butler (2004), vulnerability as the precondition of humanization depends on existing norms of recognition. Keeling stresses that the recognition needed to gain visibility does not escape a racialized and (neo-)colonial order. Referring to Fanon's description of his experience of going to the cinema, Keeling argues that the cinema belongs to the same logic of visibility as the colonial situation. Or to be more precise, Fanon's (2008, 107) experience at the cinema parallels the temporality of the colonial situation:

> I cannot go to a film without seeing myself. I wait for me. In the interval, just before the film starts, I wait for me. The people in the theater are watching me, examining me, waiting for me. A Negro groom is going to appear. My heart makes my head swim.

In the description of waiting for the beginning of the film, in expectation of the encounter with himself as N**** on the screen — where each Black figure has to stand in for all Blacks — Fanon, or the Black spectator, is kept in the interval prior to the beginning of the film, and again there is no futurity (Keeling 2007). Referring to Fanon, Keeling claims it is thus necessary to recognize the colonial violence and its temporal order, instead of searching or longing for less problematic or more truthful images. She thus calls for a project that takes this situation, the authorization of the double bind of humanization and recognition through colonial violence, as the starting point (Keeling 2007, 35).

However, Keeling claims, the interval nevertheless possesses a potential, an impossible possibility. It allows us to think about the capacity of film, to perform a fundamental transformation of the visual-temporal regime of racialization, and under the precondition that a "transformed critical engagement with its images wrenches those images open to the force of what they currently hide within them" (Keeling 2007, 44). In analogy to the colonial temporality of the interval, the film images are ascribed a potentiality here from which stems the necessity to reformulate the questions, which are mostly raised with regard to representation (the desire or demand for better images).

Can this possibility be found in *Sambizanga*? And how can we understand its militancy by taking into account Maldoror's decision for beautiful and thus 'better images'? In order to think about this question, I discuss *Sambizanga*'s mode of address with reference to Rey Chow (2012, 160), who has argued that in the 1960s alongside the anticolonial struggles a new type of battle emerged — the battle for the "commodified media frame." Chow (2012, 161) writes,

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> the point of such struggles was to take apart the wrongful public images and representations of the groups-to-be-vindicated [...] and competing for the right to own and manage the visual field, to fabricate the appropriate images and distribute the appropriate stories [...].

As previously mentioned, Maldoror wanted to bring the "forgotten wars" in Lusophone Africa to the attention of mainly European and North American audiences. Therefore, she aimed to counter the Portuguese perspective and to ignite a sense of solidarity with the Lusophone liberation struggles. I want to suggest that this orientation towards audiences in Europe and North America should also be understood as a result of the conditions of film production and distribution, since, as Maldoror states, "the film doesn't belong to me. It belongs to the producer, who is selling it. If I would like to show the films to Africans, I couldn't. There are neither African producers nor distributors, French, American [...] monopolies control the market. Nevertheless, the main thing is to make films until there are African distributors"[13] (Créau and Wetzel 2000: 110–111). Not only the distribution, but also the production itself depended on France, or rather French financing; Maldoror (1997, 209) received a budget of 380,000 FF from the Centre National du Cinéma Français and the Agence de Cooperation Culturelle et Technique (ACCR).

Maldoror was not only for the film and the actors being "too beautiful" (Hennebelle and Maldoror 1997, 209) but also criticized for its alleged technical perfection and conventional form (Hennebelle 1973). Her response to this criticism points to the problematic at stake:

> There is absolutely no reason why black filmmakers should not make a cinema of the same technical quality as a cinema made by whites. Either one is talented or not. Skin color is completely irrelevant here. Everybody should have access to the technology. [...] Further, I was accused of not making a war movie with tanks, guns, etc. However, *Sambizanga* does not conform to the definition of the war movie, as it has evolved in American cinema for instance. It is a film that describes the beginnings of the resistance movement in Angola around 1960, based on a true story. I show how a militant political organization is trying to build itself. And it is true that the MPLA wasn't very powerful upon its foundation. And, indeed, the main actors, the man and the woman are beautiful. So what, there are beautiful negroes (*de beaux nègres*). What do you want to hear! If I get to choose between beautiful and less beautiful actors, I choose the beautiful ones. Period! (Hennebelle and Maldoror 1997, 209–210)

13 *Sambizanga* was not only released in Europe and the US, but also shown at the *Festival panafricain du cinéma et de la télévision de Ouagadougou* (FESPACO, Burkina Faso) and the Carthage Film Festival (Tunesia), where it won the *Tanit d'Or* (Pfaff 1988, 208).

Maldoror describes the material as well as political conditions that shaped the production and reception of the film. She also addresses the question of recognition with regard to the racialized logic of visibility. Although Maldoror comments on the question of more adequate images of Blacks at the center of the "battle for the commodified media frame," she refuses to accept this racialized logic by denying its relevance. Nevertheless, she counters the allegations of having made a Hollywood-like film by stating that she aimed to produce a film of an "unassailable technical quality" (Hennebelle and Maldoror 1997, 210). Here, what comes into focus are the limits of the media frame and with it the effort entailed in being recognized, and even more what is needed to rework the logic of race, which also underlies the medium of film.

In order to make sense of Maldoror's aesthetic decisions, I think it is important to take into account the commercial and commodifying conditions of cinema — especially with regard to the reception of an African (or non-Western) film in the West (Europe and North America). Chow has proposed looking at films of formerly ethnographized people under the premise of "to-be-looked-at-ness" and to understand non-Western films as cross-cultural translations. She refers to the self-exoticization of China in the Chinese films of the 1980s, which travels in the form of the exoticized woman between cultures to unknown audiences. Thereby, these unforgettable exoticized images not only point to the violence they are shaped by but also lastingly destabilize the Western medium film (Chow 2010, 170). Against this backdrop I would argue that even a turn to a seeming cinematic convention as in *Sambizanga* can cause destabilization, possibly opening up the racialized logic of visibility.

Throughout this essay I have put Maldoror's decolonial aesthetics in dialogue with Fanonian decolonial thought as read by Mbembe and Keeling. Coming back to the potential Keeling finds in the interval to transform the images, or rather the visual-temporal regime of racialization, I want to argue that it is precisely the film's "beautiful images" that provide an opening. To read them exclusively with regard to their legibility and therefore recognition would miss the point. The film not only captures the mutual care that characterizes the interactions between Maria, Domingos, and the militants, but even more this care also seems to inform the camera work, as I have shown in my reading of the torture sequence. Maldoror thereby complements the politics of recognition by a *visual politics of care* as a way to open the "dungeon of appearances." This can be seen in the way she shows the Black body in its vulnerability and relationality, and even more as being part of a community of militants. In an interview with David Theo Goldberg (2018) about his book *Critique of Black Reason*, Mbembe points out that the notion of care is bound to the violence of decolonization, since only this violence is "opening up an entirely new possibility of being, of being together, of being in common, of 'companionship.'" *Sambizanga* refrains from showing the violence of decolonization — the liberation struggles against the Portuguese — but focuses on this new possibility of being together that emerges when one begins to march.

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But care is also part of the work of repair/reparation as surviving, being, moving with others, and, as Mbembe (2018) states, "building a liberating memory." By *showing the care* that shapes the relations and at the same time *seeing with care* — which by giving time to watch is also offered to the audience — Maldoror seems to achieve two things. First, the film's *caring gaze* surpasses the logic of representation and recognition and instead can be seen as a work of repair, which tries to shift the visual and temporal logic of racialization and to achieve a "redistribution of the sensible" (Rancière 2004) — in the sense that *Sambizanga* shows the process in which the Angolan people steps out of the interval of colonial time and visibility and thereby reworks the commodified media frame on an aesthetic level. Second, by telling a story about the beginning of the liberation movement — its formation — as driven by relationality, mutual care, and community building, Maldoror uses the work of fiction, understood as "a way of changing existing modes of sensory presentations and forms of enunciation; of varying frames and scales and rhythms; and of building new relationships between reality and appearance, the individual and the collective" (Rancière 2010, 141), to build — if not a liberating memory, at least a vision[14] of liberation, stressing the past's relation to the future. Therein lies, I would say, Maldoror's militant approach to a film aesthetics of decolonization as well as the film's promise when seeing it today.

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14 Here I am invoking Édouard Glissant's (1989, 65) notion of the "prophetic vision of the past".

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