GUEST EDITOR

For each issue, GLEAN invites a Guest Editor to curate a section of the magazine. We interview them and ask them to invite writers and artists who have influenced their practice (or who otherwise deserve our attention) to take up space in these pages.

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On the occasion of the exhibition ‘Johan Grimonprez: All Memory Is Theft’, an extensive retrospective that opened at ZKM Karlsruhe last June, GLEAN invited the multimedia artist, filmmaker and curator to co-edit our Summer Issue.

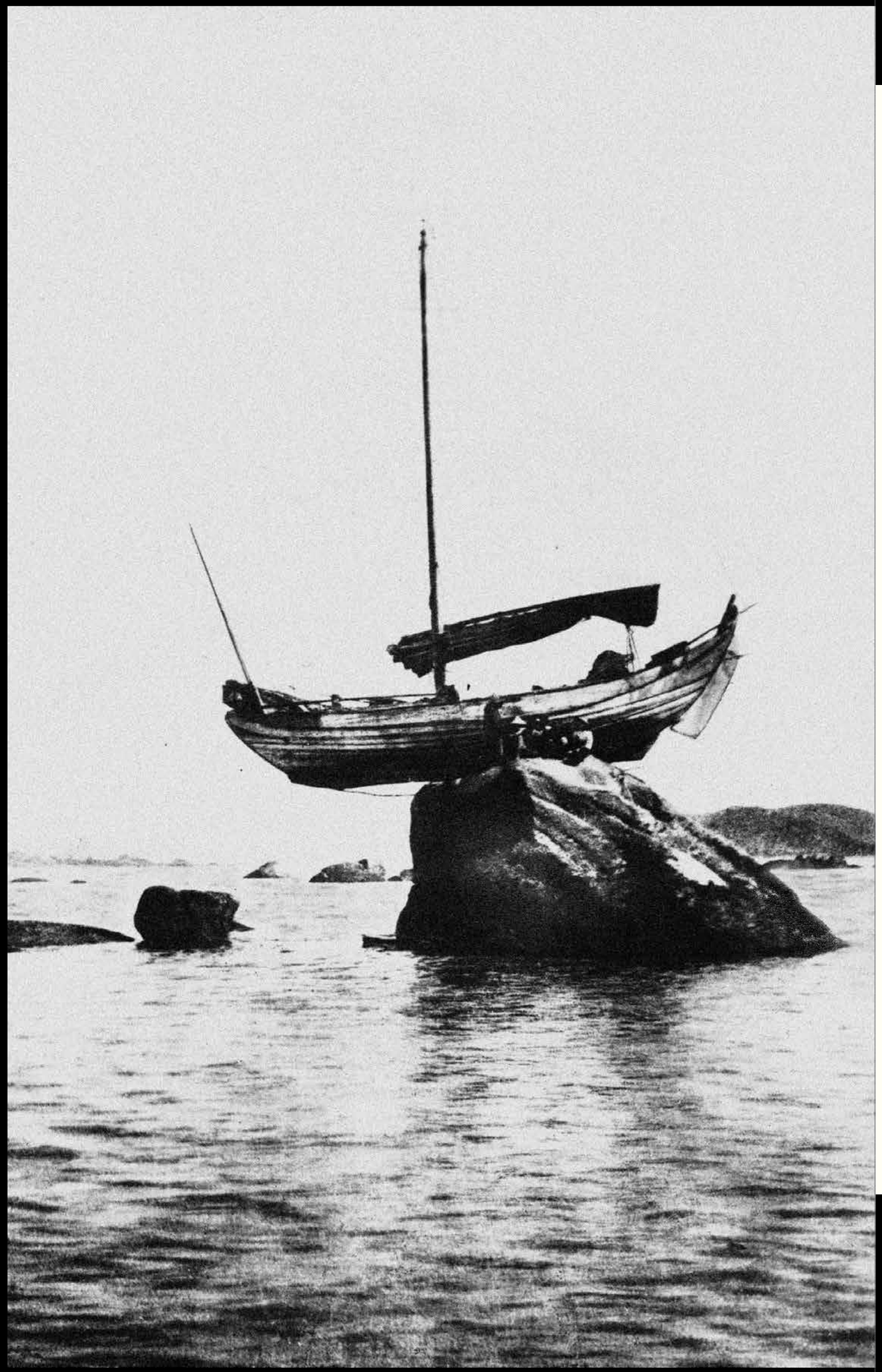
Grimonprez’s film ‘Soundtrack to a Coup d’Etat’, which was nominated for Best Documentary Film at this year’s Oscars, provides the historical and thematic backdrop for the contributions in this supplement. In an interview with the Kenyan Canadian researcher and filmmaker Zahra Moloo, Grimonprez reflects on imperial violence, corporate warfare and how cinema can disrupt the official record – and help us remember differently. (An earlier version of the interview was published on the platform Africa Is a Country on 4 January 2025. See africasacountry.com.)

An important voice in the film that is that of the Congolese writer In Koli Jean Bofane, whose novel ‘Congo Inc. Bismarck’s Testament’ (originally published in French in 2014), read aloud with magnetising eloquence by Bofane himself, establishes an early source of counter-memory among the documentary’s multiple narrative strands. Two excerpts from the book have been reproduced here (from chapters two and twelve, respectively), including the passage recited in the film.

In a visual essay, Max Pinckers & Victoria Gonzalez-Figueras explore an aspect of this history that only recently has come to the fore: the entanglement of Art Nouveau with the history of Belgian colonialism. Using a Kodak Brownie camera from the early 1900s – the very device that played a key role in exposing the atrocities of Leopold II’s Congo Free State – Pinckers and Gonzalez-Figueras capture the partially defunct, yet often assiduously preserved sites of colonial administration and governance scattered throughout Brussels: the Norwegian Chalet behind the Royal Palace, the Lever House on the Place du Congrès and the Hôtel van Eetvelde. The contribution is based on their project ‘A Sore Calamity’, commissioned by the city of Brussels in 2024 for the 130th anniversary of Art Nouveau.

‘Johan Grimonprez: All Memory Is Theft’, through 8 February 2026, ZKM Karlsruhe, zkm.de

JOHAN GRIMONPREZ



JOHAN GRIMONPREZ, *All Memory Is Theft*, 2018–present

Excerpt from ‘Congo Inc. Bismarck’s Testament’, by In Koli Jean Bofane, trans. Marjolijn de Jager, Indiana University Press, 2018, pp. 174–175; original publication in French in 2014 (Actes Sud)

12. GAME OVER! BY IN KOLI JEAN BOFANE

The algorithm Congo Inc. had been created at the moment that Africa was being chopped up in Berlin between November 1884 and February 1885. Under Leopold II’s sharecropping, they had hastily developed it so they could supply the whole world with rubber from the equator, without which the industrial era wouldn’t have expanded as rapidly as it needed to at the time. Subsequently, its contribution to the First World War effort had been crucial, even if that war—most of it—could have been fought on horseback, without Congo, even if things had changed since the Germans had further developed synthetic rubber in 1914. The involvement of Congo Inc. in the Second World War proved decisive.

The final point had come with the concept of putting the uranium of Shinkolobwe at the disposal of the United States of America, which destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki once and for all, launching the theory of nuclear deterrence at the same time, and for all time. It contributed vastly to the devastation of Vietnam by allowing the Bell UH1-Huey helicopters, sides gaping wide, to spit millions of sprays of the copper from Likasi and Kolwezi from high in the sky over towns and countryside from Danang to Hanoi, via Huế, Vinh, Lao Cai, Lang Son, and the port of Haiphong.

During the so-called Cold War, the algorithm had remained red-hot. The fuel that guaranteed proper functioning could also be made up of men. Warriors such as the Ngwaka, Mbunza, Luba, Basakata, and Lokele of Mobutu Sese Seko, like spearheads on Africa’s battlefields, went to shed their blood from Biafra to Aouzou, passing through the Front Line—in front of Angola and Cuba—through Rwanda on the Byumba end in 1990. Disposable humans could also participate in the dirty work and in coups d’état. Loyal to Bismarck’s testament, Congo Inc. more recently had been appointed as the accredited supplier of internationalism, responsible for the delivery of strategic minerals for the conquest of space, the manufacturing of sophisticated armaments, the oil industry, and the production of high-tech telecommunications material.

MAKING FILMS AGAINST AMNESIA

‘Soundtrack to a Coup d’État’, directed by Johan Grimonprez, 2024, 150 min

Interview by
Zahra Moloo

Johan Grimonprez is the director of the Oscar-nominated documentary ‘Soundtrack to a Coup d’Etat’, a film whose main theme is the assassination of Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba in 1961. The events of the film take place against a much larger historical backdrop that includes the Cold War, the independence of a number African and Asian countries, their entry into the United Nations, the Non-Aligned Movement, American imperialism, and, most importantly, the export of jazz music played by prominent African American musicians as a strategy of spreading American imperialism abroad.

Zahra Moloo spoke to Grimonprez about the archival depth of the film, the complicity of institutions like the UN, and how music – both jazz and Congolese rumba – became a site of ideological struggle during the Cold War.

ZM (Zahra Moloo) Thank you, Johan, for speaking to me about this incredible, sweeping documentary. I’d like to start off by asking: Where did your journey into making this film begin?

JG (Johan Grimonprez) I can trace it back to research we did for my previous film, ‘Shadow World’, in which we dissected the global arms industry. We worked together with Andrew Feinstein, who published a book called ‘The Shadow World: Inside the Global Arms Trade’. We interviewed several characters for the film, including Chris Hedges, a former war correspondent for The New York Times, who lost his job because he had spoken out against the invasion of Iraq under Bush. He talked about a template within politics, the ‘corporatocracy,’ and how we are essentially undergoing a corporate coup d’etat in slow motion: war has been privatised, and it’s the lobbying industry – including the revolving door between the corporate and political worlds – that dictates foreign policy.

After finishing this film, I wanted to dig into the backyard of my own country, Belgium. More specifically, I wanted to revisit a dark chapter in the history of this country related to the Democratic Republic of Congo, which was once a Belgian colony and, before that, the private property of King Leopold II. I began digging into that story and stumbled upon the fact that the assassination of Patrice Lumumba could be traced to that corporatocracy. The Belgian mining industry, in cahoots with the CIA in 1960, was responsible for the overthrow of Lumumba’s democratically elected government and for his subsequent assassination.

Then there was the figure of Nikita Khrushchev, who featured in a previous film, ‘Double Take’, where he functions as a Hitchcock doppelgänger. I was born in Belgium, jammed between East and West. In the ’60s, the ideological divide between communism and capitalism divided the world. I had always known about Khrushchev banging his shoe at the United Nations, but I had no clue this had to do with the history of the Belgian Congo, and that Nikita Khrushchev was, in essence, calling for the resignation of the then secretary-general of the UN, Dag Hammarskjöld, for the way he was dealing with the Congo crisis. Hammarskjöld was banding together with the king, the monarchy and the Union Minière mining industry to overthrow Patrice Lumumba.

ZM What was striking to me about this documentary is the depth of the research and the richness of the archive. You have excerpts from books by Congolese writer In Koli Jean Bofane, Conor Cruise O’Brien, who served as Ireland’s permanent representative to the UN and was also in Katanga, audio memoirs from Nikita Khrushchev. You have passages from Frantz Fanon, telegrams from the Belgians about the plot to assassinate Lumumba. The film archive is also very rich: interviews with Lumumbist rebels like Léonie Abo, interviews with British intelligence, mercenaries, with the CIA. How was the process of finding this material – both the text and the images? Was any of of it difficult to get a hold of?

JG With documentary, the writing happens in the editing. As you go along, you construct a film with the material from the archives and try to combine and layer several elements. This took four or five years of research, and the editing took another four years. Then there are things that you stumble upon that you didn’t even know existed. For example, there was William Burden, who besides being the president of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) was also the CEO of Lockheed and advisor to the Pentagon. He also had stakes in the mining industry in eastern Congo. He was appointed US ambassador to Brussels just before Congo gained independence, and on top of that he acted as a secret agent for the CIA and befriended Allen Dulles, the director of the CIA at the time. In his audio memoirs, which we sourced from the Department of Diplomatic Studies at Columbia University, Burden literally says, ‘Belgium is toying with the idea of assassinating Lumumba, and I think it wouldn’t be a bad idea either.’ This is coming from a US ambassador, the president of MoMA. He goes on to say, ‘Patrice Lumumba was such a damn nuisance, it was pretty obvious to go for a political assassination.’ I fell from my chair when I heard those words. This is first-hand audio, documentation that was never meant to be released, only used as research material for the Diplomatic Studies Department. Being a secret agent is apparently part of that.

It made us to restructure the film by making this the plot point, literally the turning point midway through the story. The film leads up from the non-aligned countries to the pre-1960s, then to the 15th UN General Assembly, where 16 African countries become independent. A whole wind of independence is blowing over the continent, the Afro-Asian bloc gains the majority vote in the UN – a political earthquake in itself. And against this backdrop you have the West and Belgium deciding to deal with this wind of freedom by attempting a neocolonial grab – in essence, trying to hold onto the continent of Africa.

Andrée Blouin, still from *Soundtrack to a Coup d’Etat* by JOHAN GRIMONPREZ, © Terence Spencer, Popperfoto

Nikita Khrushchev and Dwight D. Eisenhower, still from *Soundtrack to a Coup d’Etat* by JOHAN GRIMONPREZ, © AP

Ambroise Boimbo (centre), still from *Soundtrack to a Coup d'Etat* by JOHAN GRIMONPREZ, © Robert Lebeck

But the archive consists of much more. I often allude to Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, who wrote a history from the point of view of the Congo. He says, 'If we want to rewrite a history of our country, maybe we should call for decolonisation of the archives as well.' To source the history of the Congo, you have to go to the colonial heartland; for the images, you have to go to the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, or even Belgian television. Another big component is the home movies that we were able to source from Sergei Khrushchev, who filmed his father, Nikita Khrushchev, and the home movies of In Koli Jean Bofane, who reads from his book 'Congo Inc.' in the film. We were trying to get the story of Andrée Blouin, who, as a protagonist at this pivotal juncture in time, had been written out of history. To find her memoirs, we got in touch with her daughter, Eve Blouin, who sent us an undeveloped roll of film. When we developed it, we saw Andrée with Eve Blouin herself as a two-year-old kid in Leopoldville, during the period when Andrée was working for Lumumba. A couple of weeks after Andrée and Eve were caught on camera, Andrée was exiled and Eve was held at ransom in Leopoldville. Here, you feel the heartbeat of history – you have first-hand images of the characters involved. Those intimate images are in contradiction and juxtaposition with the larger global political events that were happening at the time.

ZM One of the central themes of the film is the strategic use of Black American jazz musicians as a weapon in the arsenal of American imperialism. At the same time, Black Americans were being subjected to segregation in the US. Musicians like Louis Armstrong, Nina Simone and Dizzy Gillespie were deployed as emissaries of the US in Africa and Asia. Dizzy does a tour of the Middle East – which kicks off in Iran in 1956 in honour of the Shah. He says, 'I would be a better emissary than Kissinger.' Later on, Louis Armstrong goes to the DRC to play in front of thousands of people, but this concert is actually a smokescreen: at that moment, Lumumba's assassination is being planned by CIA agents. Can you talk more about the use of jazz as a strategy of American imperialism? Why did some musicians go along with it? We get a sense that they had some idea of what was going on, especially in the case of Dizzy Gillespie.

JG It's very schizophrenic, because they were used as tools to propagate and defend democracy, while at home they were second-class citizens who were essentially barred from voting. As Dizzy says, 'I didn't go over there to sugarcoat segregation back home.' In 1956 Louis Armstrong was sent out, and it is Edward Murrow who films him. Later on, Murrow becomes the director of the United States Information Agency, which was sponsored by the US State Department and used soft power as a means of 'defending democracy'. On another level, you could talk about Hollywood in a similar way, how it seduced the rest of the world. Heiner Müller said at one point, from East Berlin, that '[t]he most powerful message we got from the West was actually the commercials.'

In 1956, when Edward Murrow accompanies Louis Armstrong to Ghana, it's amazing – as an African American, Armstrong is treated as a second-class citizen back at home, but in Accra he's celebrated by an audience of 100,000 Ghanaians. And wherever he went, even if he was used as a tool of propaganda, he was also outspoken. At one point during the Africa tour, he refused to play for a segregated audience in

apartheid South Africa. To contextualise this a bit, there was a huge shift in the United Nations with the influx of all the independent countries, the Afro-Asian bloc. Nikita Khrushchev was proposing a decolonisation vote, while the United States was sending arm twisters into the UN General Assembly to buy up African votes and sending jazz ambassadors to win the hearts and minds of people in Africa.

But these jazz ambassadors were not always in the know. Louis Armstrong was sent to Katanga, which was seceding from the Congo with the financial aid of Union Minière. The company paid billions to prop up Moïse Tshombe's government. Katanga's secession was not ratified by the international community, so it was illegal to even send US ambassadors, but the Katanga lobby and the CEO of Union Minière pushed for Louis Armstrong to visit Katanga. When he arrived, he was lodged at Moïse Tshombe's presidential villa and had dinner with Larry Devlin, the CIA's station chief in the Congo; Clare H. Timberlake, the US ambassador to the Congo; and Belgian advisors, including Harold Charles d'Aspremont Lynden's delegation, the Ministry of African Affairs. Here is Louis Armstrong facing Larry Devlin, but not knowing that he's the head of the CIA in the Congo, because Devlin was undercover as an agricultural advisor. Seated at that dinner table, in November 1960, Armstrong started grilling Moïse Tshombe, saying, 'Hey, you're in bed with big money.' We found an audio interview with Trummy Young, who was a trombonist for the All Stars that accompanied Louis Armstrong to Katanga, in which Young said, 'We felt all of this was not quite right. We were siding with Lumumba.' So in a way they were in the know – but they were not in the know about just how insidious it was that Armstrong was actually having dinner with the very people plotting the murder of Patrice Lumumba with the Belgians.

ZM Your film also includes Congolese rumba music as part of the soundtrack – we hear some of the iconic bands from that period: Franco Luambo, TPOK Jazz, Joseph Kabasele. Those relations were schizophrenic as well. For instance, Franco Luambo, possibly the most famous Congolese musician of all time, wrote a song called 'Lumumba héro national.' But he also sang for and received a lot of support from Mobutu. Can you tell me more about the relationship between Congolese musicians and politics? Did it mirror the relationship between American jazz musicians and politics?

JG The film largely focuses on American jazz ambassadors and how they were used as a propaganda tool, but it also addresses the roles of Abbey Lincoln and Max Roach and their album 'We Insist!', which was performed live on Belgian television. When Adlai Stevenson, the US ambassador to the UN under Kennedy, announces that Patrice Lumumba has been murdered along with two of his colleagues, it is Abbey Lincoln, together with the Women's Writers Coalition in Harlem, writer Maya Angelou and the playwright Rosa Guy, who calls for a protest at the United Nations Security Council. They literally crash the Security Council, stand up, and scream. So there is another element to jazz that becomes apparent here – namely, how jazz was inspired by the Freedom Movement and became part of the Civil Rights Movement. All of that is not separate. For example, one track from the album 'We Insist!', 'Tears for Johannesburg,' was inspired by African women in Sharpeville, South Africa, tearing up their apartheid passports as an act of protest – events which preceded the Sharpeville massacre of 1960.

So there's a back-and-forth between how the liberation and independence movements on the continent were inspiring the Civil Rights Movement, but also inspiring jazz. It's not just that music is being used as an instrument – it also becomes a tool of rebellion. Even if it turns into a scream at the very end of the film, it's a scream of resilience, of not agreeing with the state of the world.

It was a similar case with rumba. There is a back-and-forth between fourth- to sixth-generation Congolese whose ancestors made it to Cuba during the transatlantic passage, and Cuban music inspired by Congolese heritage – conga, rumba, cha-cha – which made it back to Leopoldville. Rumba in the Congo arose out of the exchanges of musicians working on

Elephant Cargo, still from *Soundtrack to a Coup d'Etat* by JOHAN GRIMONPREZ, © British Pathé

ships going back and forth between Havana and Leopoldville.

The rumba also influenced how people lived and what was going on, sometimes in subtle ways. The first rumba track featured in the film, 'Sooner or Later, the World Will Change', by Adou Elenga, was a protest song. It was banned by the Belgian colonialists, who put Adou Elenga in prison. This reveals a connection between politics and how one stands in the world. During the independence movement, before Patrice Lumumba became prime minister, he hired Rock-a-Mambo as a way to raise consciousness and talk about independence, going from bar to bar in the Cité, the native neighbourhood of Leopoldville. In 1960, when the round table was organised in Brussels to discuss Congolese independence, the Belgians were thinking, We're going to grant independence in a couple of decades. But all the Congolese political parties argued unanimously that independence should be given much more rapidly. There was a joint call to release Patrice Lumumba, and when he arrived in Brussels on the 25th of January 1960, he was accompanied by Joseph Kabasele, Docteur Nico and African Jazz. When they claimed independence towards the end of the month of January, it was celebrated by those musicians, and it was in the Plaza Hotel in Brussels that they composed 'Independence Cha Cha'. That anthem mentions all the political parties in the Congo at the time, in a way reflecting a unanimous solidarity. 'Independence Cha Cha' became very popular across the continent of Africa as a call for the independence of all the other countries. It became the name for the Liberation Party in Rhodesia, which became Zimbabwe after gaining independence.

ZM One of the striking revelations in this film is the role of the UN secretary-general Dag Hammarskjöld. So far, the main narrative we hear about Hammarskjöld is about his efforts to preside over the first UN peacekeeping forces in Egypt and Congo and about how he was killed in a plane crash in 1961, with the possible involvement of the CIA.

In your film, we see Lumumba asking the UN for help in confronting the Belgian occupation of Katanga. The Belgians plead with Hammarskjöld not to intervene in Katanga, and he actually flies there to meet Moïse Tshombe. In the film we hear that 'the downfall of Lumumba was inscribed in that event'. You also reveal how Hammarskjöld says to the US ambassador to the UN that 'Lumumba must be broken.' To what extent are Hammarskjöld and the UN responsible for Lumumba's assassination?

JG It's a crucial question. We initially included a statement about his murder at the very end of the film, along with a series of names: Kwame Nkrumah, overthrown in 1966; Malcolm X, shot in Harlem 1965; Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet premier, overthrown in 1964 and written out of Soviet history; and then Dag Hammarskjöld, killed mid-September 1961. We didn't include it in the end, but I thought it was important that all these people were in some way victims of that neocolonial grab towards the Global South. Of course, the only one who survived was Andrée Blouin, who, after two more death threats, was exiled from the Congo by way of Switzerland.

I had hoped in the film to sketch more of an ambivalent character arc for Hammarskjöld. He's a person who is suffering, and you can read it in his face. I really think he had his back against the wall and was navigating all these different forces. In the General Assembly, the Global South community was pushing for a United Nations force against the colonial powers and Hammarskjöld was siding with them. The UN Congo Mission was the biggest mission ever of its kind, and if that failed… in the film they all ask this question, 'What if the United Nation fails?' And it did fail, actually, because Lumumba was killed. But Hammarskjöld was in a difficult position, because both the United Kingdom and the United States were threatening to withdraw their funding.

An important source and advisor for the film was Ludo De Witte and his book 'The Assassination of Patrice Lumumba', published in 1999. He was able to gather a lot of evidence from United Nations cables and cables within Belgium that suggested that Dag Hammarskjold and the Belgian monarchy were indeed complicit in the downfall of Lumumba. The situation in Belgium was really shocking – the book was published 1999 and there was a parliamentary commission in 2004, which produced the half-baked conclusion that the monarchy knew about the murder. That's why the film ends with that statement on its own, the singular statement that the Belgian government was complicit in murder, because that issue still hasn't been concluded in Belgium. They are still arguing, 'Should we say, "We have regret"? Or should we say, "We're sorry"?' This is about reparations as well, because if you issue an official apology, you actually admit that there was a crime and that there should be consequences.

ZM I want to talk about the style of the film. You have these references, like the clip from René Magritte and his painting 'The Treachery of Images' with the famous sentence, 'This is not a pipe.' Later, during the coup d'etat against Lumumba, Mobutu says, 'This is not a coup d'etat.' What were you trying to do with the choice of images in the film, and the use of images as allegory?

JG Well, 'This is not a pipe', 'This is not a coup' is so Belgian. Belgium is full of schizophrenia. We have three official languages, but we don't have a national language. It comes back to the whole thing of being a subtitled country; for instance, when you go to the supermarket to buy a bottle of milk, it's always labelled in two languages, and you feel that sense of displacement. It has to do with how irony or jokes can contain contradictions. 'This is not a pipe' is a typical 'belgicism', where you suddenly get a subtitled version of something, causing alienation. 'This is not a coup' – you can read between the lines. You have a pipe-smoking Allen Dulles constantly saying something, but for the most part, he's denying something. But by denying – 'This is not what it is' – he is saying what it is. It's this irony of denial that exposes what's really going on. In his very last appearance in the film, he says, 'We might have made a mistake. We were actually exaggerating the communist threat.' He finally says something that is more accurate. But I find this way of holding contradictions interesting, just like humour, and maybe politics is also a part of that. Take the more contemporary phrase 'weapons of mass destruction'– it's in denial that things are revealed, in these contradictions. Truth might be closer to contradiction.

Patrice Lumumba arrives in Brussels, still from *Soundtrack to a Coup d'Etat* by JOHAN GRIMONPREZ, © Harry Pot, Anefo, Nederlands Nationaal Archief

ZM The film also explores Congo's resources – uranium used for building the first atomic bomb, but also coltan, copper, and so on. You have images of Tesla vehicles and Apple advertisements. The relationship between the pillaging of minerals and the history of war and intervention in the DRC is well known. Today Congo is still in crisis, with Rwanda-backed M23 having taken Goma and large areas of the east. To what extent do we need to move beyond looking at minerals and resources and consider other elements as part of the explanation for Congo's brutal history?

JG To me the whole corporatocracy is the engine. Of course, it includes the rift between Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda and the genocide that crossed over to the Congo. A lot of refugees found their way to the Congo and that created a more complex situation. But then the rift between the Hutus and the Tutsis dates back to the Belgians, who used a divide-and-conquer strategy to gain access to the region's riches and conflict minerals. Ludo De Witte zooms in on this aspect in his recent book 'Moord in Burundi' (2021), providing an analysis of how the whole rift between Tutsis and Hutus was fabricated. The colonial military force also caused rifts between identities – they would send people from other parts of the country to fight when revolts occurred. In the army, identities and cultures were pitted against one another, and that's part of what's going on in eastern Congo. Indeed, the Tesla and iPhone images are followed by the statistics on the number of women who have been raped. And if you look at the map from the film 'City of Joy', which is about women survivors of sexual violence in eastern Congo, there is a direct correlation between instances of rape and the mining sites.

If eastern Congo did not have what they call a 'geological scandal of resources,' the occupation of the region would likely not have happened – and I use 'occupation' deliberately, because you can compare it to the occupation of Gaza or what's going on now with the bombing of Yemen. The European Union recently approved weapons shipments to Kagame, and there were troops embedded with the M23. And M23 is a private militia involved with other private militias that are involved in the raping of women. I was recently with Zap Mama, who reads the voice of Andrée Blouin in the film, and she was texting Denis Mukwege, who founded Panzi Hospital. He was telling her that it's unclear what will happen with the hospital, because M23 also occupied Bukavu, where Panzi Hospital is located. So that is why the iPhone commercial is in the film. It is literally a wake-up call: the lithium and the coltan that is sourced for green energy or green technology can be traced back to child labour and sexual violence against women.

ZM How is the film being received in Africa since its release, and are there plans for it to be seen more widely on the continent?

JG It was shown at the Andrée Blouin Center in Kinshasa, and it's been shown in festivals in Kinshasa, where ironically it was pirated. It was released recently in Nairobi, and it has a distributor in Kenya. There is a Moroccan distributor who distributes on the continent. It was shown at El Gouna Festival in Egypt, where we won the prize. Vijay Prashad has also announced the Andrée Blouin Prize for journalism. The whole story of Andrée Blouin is being written back into history. Her memoirs have been published by Eve Blouin and released by Verso. The film was also shown at the Patria Colloquium in Havana, where it was very well received. We had a meeting at the Film Institute in Havana, and they don't even have electricity, the generator is broken. We went to the Casa de las Américas, but I couldn't even go to the toilet, because they don't have water. What's going on in Cuba is, in a sense, still an echo of this whole Global South politics. What was a little bit of a homecoming for me was the screening at the Maysles Documentary Center in Harlem on 125th Street, one block from Hotel Theresa, organised by the Friends of the Congo.

At the same time, the film was part of the Oscar nominations, so it also reached a big audience. I invited Zap Mama aka Marie Daulne to write a statement with me demanding that the extraction economy be held accountable for what's going on in eastern Congo. On the bottom of her shoes, Marie had written 'Free Congo,' and when she opened her dress, it also displayed the words 'Free Congo'. If we had won the Oscar, we would have taken those words onto the stage, just as 'No Other Land' made a very important political statement about what's going on in Gaza and the West Bank.

Excerpt from 'Congo Inc. Bismarck's Testament', by In Koli Jean Bofane, trans. Marjolijn de Jager, Indiana University Press, 2018, pp. 20–25; original publication in French in 2014 (Actes Sud)

2. WHO ARE YOU? BY IN KOLI JEAN BOFANE

Isookanga was holding a young smoke-dried python, rolled up in a circle. He turned to a mother dressed in a *pagne* that said, "My husband is capable." [1] He needed to be done with it: "Give me thirty dollars."

"Twenty."

"All right, I'll take it."

After weeks on the water, the boat finally moored in Kingabwa, Kinshasa's commercial port. Dockworkers were busy unloading and there was a general crush because, all at once, part of the crowd had come from the city to do their shopping while others, loaded down with their countless packages, wanted to disembark. For his part, Isookanga had no interest in lingering. He pocketed the money from the game he had just sold, stuffed some smoked antelope and a porcupine in the canvas bag he was carrying, then laboriously made his way to the gangway that would take him to solid ground.

Stepping out of a taxi-bus in front of the central train station, Isookanga couldn't get over it. In the village, when he'd typed "Kinshasa" in Google's long rectangle, he had seen many marvels, but what was displayed before him surpassed everything. Seeing the Boulevard du 30-Juin stretching out in front of his eyes, Isookanga was sure it could incorporate all of Wafania, Monkoto, and Basankusu combined, and perhaps even Boende. The buildings lining it were even more stately than the trees of the forest. A huge throng was scurrying along, and the young Ekonda fell in with them, checking the uncle's address: Avenue Boyota in the Lingwala district. Someone told him it was near the Fine Arts Academy and showed him which public transportation to take.

"Avenue de la Libération! Libération!" A taxi-bus came charging down. Hanging on to the open door and thumping it with his fist, the conductor shouted, "Avenue de la Libération! Libération!"

Isookanga rushed forward to find a spot, but that wasn't easy for someone with no experience in the sport. Faced with the swarm of passengers that pounced on the vehicle, he didn't get very far because of his small stature; still he managed to squeeze between a muscular soldier and the impressive décolleté of a mother who, judging by the dust that covered her from head to toe, was probably selling manioc flour at the market.

* * * * *

"And who are you?"

"Bwale Iselenge. The oldest son of your husband's big brother."

"Oldest? Why are you so short then?"

Isookanga didn't know what to say.

Ten minutes earlier, he had knocked on the gate of the uncle's house. At first the guard turned him away, taking him for a peddler with his canvas bag. When he introduced himself as Bwale Iselenge, the boss's nephew, the guard had to let him in. He showed him a bench under a mango tree and asked him to wait as he announced his pres-

ence to the lady of the house.

Now she stood there before him, towering over him at her full height, a barely concealed disdainful pout on her face. Her unrelenting gaze traveled from Isookanga's eyes to the T-shirt printed with Snoop Dogg's smirk. "Go back over there and sit down. Anyway, Ambroise isn't here yet."

A long time later the guard opened the gate for a Mercedes, its motor rumbling. The uncle came out of the car and after a quick glance toward the bench went into the house. Immediately thereafter, Isookanga clearly heard the woman screaming. Among the words he could make out were "parasite," "take advantage," "what will my family say," "he's too short." The tone gave him to understand that his pseudo-relative was trying to vindicate himself for something that wasn't his responsibility, but in the shrew's eyes he was certainly at fault. The woman flung another two or three commands at him and then it was silent.

Instantly the uncle appeared on the terrace. "Come here."

Isookanga moved forward.

"My wife says that you are my brother's son. Are you actually Bwale Iselenge?"

"Absolutely."

"And how old are you?" he asked, a bit alarmed by his interlocutor's stature.

"Twenty-five, almost twenty-six, Uncle. I'm the one who wrote you not long ago and who sent you the anteater. You suggested that I come to Kinshasa, and here I am," Isookanga added with the most radiant smile he could muster.

"I know, I know, but I didn't expect that my big brother's son would be so... that he wouldn't have the family's build."

Isookanga continued to watch Ambroise Iselenge without saying another word, his smile now bigger than ever.

"Well, then, so be it," the uncle said, resigned. "Do you have any plans?"

"I have to register somewhere. At an academic department."

"It's a little late, but what is it exactly that you want to do?"

"Globalization, computer technology, Uncle." Nothing could temper the joy on Isookanga's face. He leaned down to his canvas bag. "I couldn't come here without bringing you some game." He stuck one arm into the bag. "I've brought you smoked antelope feet and a porcupine. And a little bieya. [2] You're crazy about that, it seems, and it's in season now."

"Oh, thank you."

The uncle was looking Isookanga over. His wishes notwithstanding, he couldn't bring himself to trust the individual before him more than halfway, in view of his height. The little guy claimed to be his nephew, no one could assert the contrary yet, one had to stay open to the possibility. For now, at least, the most important thing was to reassure his wife, in the hope she would understand that he couldn't just send this guy away who allegedly was his relative. No matter how small this Ekonda was, he would have to check things out before making any kind of decision. For most of the people from the village who promised to come to the city, the plan often remained only a pipedream to be trotted out year after year. Meeting no resistance, this one had actually come to Kinshasa in just a few months. Ambroise Iselenge sensed the level of the young man's motivation. But how could so much impetus be contained in such a minuscule body? Besides, as far as he knew, in his family they were all tall. They even called him Engambe Ambroise. [3] Why was this nephew's build so paltry? Ambroise Iselenge's gaze went down a notch.

"Fine, we'll get you settled. My wife will take care of you... Darling?"

And the man disappeared. Disdain imparted through each of her gestures, Madame put him up in one of the bedrooms. She showed him the bathroom, showed him the toilet bowl, asked whether he was familiar with its purpose, and, looking as if she weren't touching it, handed him the only towel he was allowed to use.

After having dinner with the family in desolate silence—across from the two kids who wouldn't stop laughing whenever they looked at him—Isookanga excused himself and went to his room. That night the young man couldn't fall asleep right away, not because of the euphoria he felt being in the city surrounded by a loving family but because hearing Mr. and Mrs. Iselenge arguing at length, he vaguely sensed that somehow he was at the heart of the issue. He told himself that a session of video games would take his mind off it. Half lying on the bed, he switched on the laptop.

When the lands of Gondavanaland appeared on the screen, Isookanga forgot everything else, focusing on carefully moving surface-to-surface missile launch pads around. To clear the terrain where he expected to make progress, he began by engaging his Katyusha batteries. It looked like fireworks. The troops of Mass Graves Petroleum, cells of Skulls and Bones Mining Fields, and members of the security services recruited by American Diggers were falling, brought down by the storms of shrapnel Congo Bololo was hurling.

Congo Bololo was a raider of the worst kind. By seizing all the raw materials of the lands he'd managed to capture, thanks to his talent for dividing the forces, he'd succeeded in weakening other rivals as cunning as Uranium and Security, which could no longer procure supplies of either munitions or fuel, its supply lines stretching out progressively from east to west on Gondavanaland's terrain. Because once he'd helped himself not only to the minerals but also to lands where there was nothing, Congo Bololo was able to ban all flights over his aerial space by putting up surface-to-air missile launch pads. According to the blogosphere, he was also one of the few to own stealth weapons, but obviously no one had seen them yet, since the planes only went out at night to strike and then disappear.

The Goldberg & Gils Atomic Project was still holding on, for its cobalt and depleted uranium shells were causing damage, notably on Hiroshima-Naga's armored vehicles, which to the intrepid Isookanga suddenly seemed even more timorous. After conquering lands through the use of white phosphorous bombs, Congo Bololo could exploit gold. More sought after than ever in these times of rapidly depreciating

currencies at the Stock Exchange, the precious metal additionally earned a significant number of points.

After adding up his gains, Isookanga turned off the computer and tried to sleep, but still overheated from the battle he'd just waged, his mind kept drifting to the music playing outside. At one point he couldn't help but think of the village he'd left behind and the safety it ensured. The afternoon of his departure he had gone to say good-bye to Uncle Lomama, but, sitting in front of his hut, the old man hadn't even turned around. Glasses on his nose, pen in hand, he was pretending to be studying a notebook. He was sullen with his nephew, but what did he blame Isookanga's mother for, who for years had been spending her time running up and down river to ply her trade, worrying as much about her son as she had about the first *safou* she'd ever picked? [4] Abandoned and forsaken, Isookanga preferred to follow his destiny alone.

From a nearby bar he could hear "Orgasy," Fally Ipupa's song:

Mongongo na ngai eyokani ti na libanda éééé
Soki ba ko yoka, ba yoka na bango
Est-ce que vie na ngai mpe eza na maboko na bango?
Bango bakoka kosala ngai nini?
Po ngai mowei ya bolingo oyo
Nazalaka na problèmes na ba vivants te, non,
assurer ngai, WW Bob Masua. [5]

For a moment Isookanga felt a little sorry for himself. Would his love of high technology condemn him to a night of uncertainty? In order not to sink into counterproductive homesickness, he closed his eyes, invoked the mysterious Bob Masua to reassure him, and then wisely forced himself to put the charming singer's words into perspective, thereby shaking off a feeling of abandonment.

1 A *pagne* is a piece of fabric usually around two yards long, wrapped around the waist as a skirt.–Tr.s' note. Every *pagne* pattern is given a title or saying.
2 A plant heart that tastes like heart of palm and looks vaguely like macaroni.
3 Ambroise the giant.
4 Non-sweet fruit that is plunged in boiling water for two minutes before it can be eaten. Very good at breakfast with *chikwangue*—manioc—or bread.
5 "My voice has been heard all the way outside / May those who want to hear, hear it / My life, is it in their hands? / What can they possibly do to me? / Because I am a martyr to this love? / I have no problem with the living, no, reassure me, WW Bob Masua."

Max Pinckers & Victoria Gonzalez-Figueras

A Sore Calamity (2024)

'The kodak has been a sore calamity to us. The most powerful enemy that has confronted us, indeed.' – Mark Twain, 'King Leopold's Soliloquy', 1905

In the pamphlet 'King Leopold's Soliloquy' (1905), Mark Twain assumes the persona of King Leopold II, bemoaning the arrival of the camera, the 'incorruptible kodak,' the only witness he 'couldn't bribe.' To the King's horror, this new technology is able to bear witness to the atrocities he is committing in Congo, exposing the lies that he'd been able to maintain via the press. To deal with the shocking images of the violent management of the Congo Free State, the teams working for Leopold II installed one of the first large-scale propaganda operations in the history of organised tyranny. Photography became a veritable weapon against the Congo Reform Association, the humanitarian activist group that sought to expose and ultimately stop the King's brutal regime in Congo. A secret service was set up to censor photographers who denounced crimes, torture and rape perpetrated by Belgians in Congo, and to bribe others to produce 'good photographs.'

For the 130th anniversary of Art Nouveau in Brussels, the city commissioned Max Pinckers & Victoria Gonzalez-Figueras to produce a site-specific installation at the Hôtel van Eetvelde. With its lavish interiors full of imported materials and references to Congo, this house is a prime example of the link between colonialism and Art Nouveau. It was designed by Victor Horta for Edmond van Eetvelde, the 'minister of Congo', to serve as his personal residence. It was here that Van Eetvelde orchestrated plans and lobbied for the colonisation and administration of the Congo Free State.

Influenced by Twain and departing from Art Nouveau's entanglement with colonialism, Pinckers & Gonzalez-Figueras produced a series of photographs with a Kodak Brownie camera from the early 1900s. They focused their lens not on scenes of colonial violence in Congo, but on locations in Brussels that served as sites of power during the existence of Leopold II's Congo Free State. These sites continue to shape the city's historical landscape to this day. They include the Norwegian Chalet behind the Royal Palace, from where Leopold II administrated his colony; the halls of the Lever House that served as a colonial propaganda museum; and ornamental elements inside the Hôtel van Eetvelde. The photographs also capture objects tied to this legacy, such as the original mould of Leopold II's equestrian statue, items from the 1987 International Exposition, and a prestigious Art Nouveau piece gifted to Van Eetvelde by Belgian industrialists.

pp. 48-55: MAX PINCKERS & VICTORIA GONZALEZ-FIGUERAS, 'A Sore Calamity', in-situ installation, Hôtel van Eetvelde, LAB·AN, Brussels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MAX PINCKERS and VICTORIA GONZALEZ-FIGUERAS are based in Brussels, Belgium. They have been collaborating for the past ten years on documentary photography projects. Victoria works in the cultural field as a researcher and producer. Max is a speculative documentarian, teacher and writer on photography. Victoria has consistently assisted Max in his projects as a production manager, but they have recently been making new work together as co-authors.