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## **Pandemic Media**

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# **Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory**

edited by

**Philipp Dominik Keidl, Laliv Melamed,  
Vinzenz Hediger, and Antonio Somaini**



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# KONFIGURATIONEN DES FILMS

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**CAPITALISM**

**DE-COLONIZATION**

**ARCHIVES**

**COLONIALISM**

**IMPERIALISM**



# **A New Period in History: Decolonizing Film Archives in a Time of Pandemic Capitalism**

**Didi Cheeka**

26 years ago, carried away by the bourgeois euphoria over the fall of the Soviet Union, Francis Fukuyama made the now infamous prediction that history had ended—its final expression, the capitalist mode of production. But, unfortunately for Fukuyama, history is not easily disposed of—by merely proclaiming its demise on the pages of a book. It has re-asserted itself with vengeance and its funeral orator was forced to re-edit his oratory. Things, as Hegel said, become their opposite: statues and monuments erected in celebration of slavery and colonization are being pulled-down and, rather than an end, what we are witnessing is the opening of a new period in world history. My attitude, as a researcher of (de)colonial film archives—in a time of the pandemic crisis of capitalism—is to theorize and historicize this study within the ongoing political struggle for decolonization.

*All that is solid melts into air*

*Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels*

A specter stalks the world: the specter of the COVID-19 pandemic. To further deploy the words of Marx and Engels set down in *The Communist Manifesto*, “The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the entire surface of the globe.” It is this, the establishment and exploitation of the world market, that has given a cosmopolitan character not just to production and consumption but also to epidemics. The same instruments—improved and immensely facilitated means of production and communication—by which the bourgeoisie, in its nascent period, had drawn ex-colonial societies into capitalist civilization have become, in the period of its senile decay, facilitators of newly-emerging infectious diseases from country to country.

No doubt, referring to Marx and Engels evokes, already, the question of the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. Whereas I subscribe to the Marxist ideology, I particularly reference Marx to evoke the capitalist phase of primitive accumulation—I deploy this to the coloniality of imperial archives, that is, as owing their existence to the violent extraction of visual raw materials from ex-colonies. The extraction of colonized bodies from colonies and subsequent enslavement in imperial countries, the extraction of raw materials from colonies to feed imperial industry were complemented by the extraction of artefacts and visual [human] raw material framed in celluloid to feed imperial anthropological museums and audio-visual archives.

In a sense, then, it is correct to say that colonial [film] archives—as sources/sites of knowledge—are not, to reference Azoulay, “benign sites of research,” and to uncritically engage with these sources/sites is to “take part in the conflation of violence and scholarship.” To treat them otherwise leads, further referencing Azoulay, to “easily inhabiting the scripted roles offered to us as scholars, curators, photographers, and spectators.” In the wake of growing protests over the latest racist police killing in the US, Afua Hirsch has written in *The Guardian* that “the racism that killed George Floyd was built in Britain.” While agreeing with the body of the writing, I insist that the racism responsible for the recent killing was built in ex-colonies. It is through this prism that I will engage with researching, theorizing, and historicizing colonial cinema and archives in a time of pandemic capitalism.

I was already engaged in this task before the new coronavirus achieved pandemic level. In foregrounding the problem posed to this task by the pandemic, my intention is to reference, not the earlier phase of research but the period just before the viral wave—which took shape during the Everything Passes,

Except the Past - (De)colonial Film Archives workshop held in Lisbon. (I'm referring to the archival workshop in Lisbon, 2019, when a group of filmmakers, activists, and researchers from Africa and Europe gathered to discuss the past, present, and future of archives with film material from colonial and anti-colonial contexts. The workshop, run by Goethe Institut Portugal, was intended to initiate a platform for a call to action and reflection on decolonizing film archives.)

As both fall-out and follow-up to the workshop, a Call for Action & Reflection on Decolonising Archives was migrated digitally at the Latitude Festival - Rethinking Power Relations due to restrictions imposed by the pandemic. The digital festival, involving readings and panel discussions via Zoom video meetings, revealed digital possibilities and, at the same time, sharply underlined geographical inequalities and limitations inherent in usage—for instance, I experienced technical difficulties participating from Nigeria.

The spread of the virus will dramatically accelerate protectionist tendencies on a world scale—I mean this not in reference to international trade, but rather, to cultural exchange, since travel barriers would seriously impact international research and residencies. Digital migration, triggered by the pandemic, will likely increase, ushering in less reliance on humans and more on automation—an increase in remote working, videoconferencing, and other new workplace communication technologies will further widen the north-south abyss and bring into sharp focus the (neo)colonial structures responsible for the cultural-historical circumstances in the ex-colonies.

Under the impact of the new coronavirus, which has set in motion a rapidly unfolding chain reaction on a world scale—from protests against systemic racism to the struggle for decolonization of monuments—all the contradictions of capitalism are coming crashing to the surface. Necessity, to reference Engels, expresses itself as accident. The virus is only an accidental trigger for all the accumulated tensions of colonization—expressed in Black Lives Matter, the Monuments Must Fall movement, and demands for decolonization and restitution. These movements and demands are part of the crisis of the capitalist system heightened by the pandemic.

Writing about the far reaching and enduring effects of May '68 on film criticism and theory, Donato Totaro has stated: "*Cahiers du Cinéma*, once an auteurist journal, became politically surcharged... *Cinéthique*, which began publication in January 1969, took a more radical position than *Cahiers* by abandoning narrative cinema and championing marginal cinema (documentary, avant-garde)" (Totaro 1998). What would (de)colonial archives look like post-pandemic—what new life and meaning would they acquire? What form would researching, theorizing, and historicizing these archives assume? Who will have access to

these archives—from the standpoint of power relations inherent in ownership and interpretation?

In this period of politicization of artistic and academic life—with calls to decolonize film studies, cinema, and archives—researching, theorizing, and historicizing (de)colonial film archives demands a terminological approach previously mostly specific to political economy. I turn to Marx, therefore, who wrote in the pages of *Capital* that “the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins... are the chief momenta of primitive accumulation.” Activist author Naomi Klein has described what she calls “disaster capitalism”—a profit-driven approach to natural and man-made disasters. In the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, the world seems set for the shock doctrine to strike again.

To elaborate: Among the first films made in Nigeria as part of the colonial enterprise is the film *Anti-Plague Operations* (1929), on the effort to curtail an earlier pandemic—the bubonic plague. Much like the method, in primitive accumulation, of appropriating colonial raw materials for private imperial profit, colonial audio-visual productions have been privatized in commercial film archives in the UK—commodifying colonized bodies visually and effectively denying ex-colonial users access to their visual bodies. The continuing holding of films from former colonies in commercial archives, especially in the current pandemic, preventing non-commercial access in imperial countries smacks of Klein’s label.

So, to refer to the violence of primitive accumulation archived in colonial audio-visual sites means more than actual physical violence—it is in reference, also, to the violence inherent in its presumption, the violence of presuming the sole right of ownership of images of colonized people and excluding them, in practice, from right and access to these images. The violence is not, therefore, solely in the method of acquisition, but also in the power relations inherent in the repository, on what to archive, and who has access to them. This violence extends to research: how do we research films from (de)colonial archives in a time of pandemic crisis of capitalism?

To consider the question: Contrary to claims by the archives, most, if not all, European archives have only a fraction of their archival holdings online—so research, even if digital possibilities permit, can hardly be conducted online. This, again, underlines the restrictions imposed by the pandemic on scholars from the south—research requires on-site presence, rendered impossible by travel restrictions. Distance research, via digital possibilities, is further encumbered by power relations—the imperial power to name colonized people. For instance, researching Angola’s struggles against colonization in Portuguese archives turns up nothing like revolutionaries or freedom fighters—except under the imperial label of Angolan terrorists.

Perhaps, related somewhat to the above, it would be possible to mention a colonial production, *Daybreak in Udi*, which won an Oscar (1950) at the Academy Awards for Best Documentary and also received a BAFTA Award for Best Documentary Film, without much digression—*Daybreak*, filmed in eastern Nigeria about the building of a community health center, is a fictional film presented as documentary. I mention this film to highlight how the imperial camera's access to colonized human raw material could produce a regime of truth for scholars, curators, artists, and researchers to consult as benign sites of knowledge.

It is possible to say that these issues are only tangentially connected with the problems of researching (de)colonial film archives in a pandemic. I connect one with the other, however tenuously, to highlight an ignored aspect of the pandemic—ex-colonies handled the outbreak better than imperial countries. This speaks to the fight to decolonize film archives: the cliché is that ex-colonies are incapable of handling their own archives, hence, the refusal to reconstitute.

To end by posing questions that go to the heart of the struggle to decolonize archives, questions calculated not to provide ready-made answers but serve, rather, to trigger discourse: how would films from (de)colonial archives be presented post-pandemic, so as not to reproduce the violence inherent in their production? What new truth, in terms of speculating and repurposing these materials, would post-pandemic researchers of these archives bring to bear? And how do we decolonize archives when colonialism still exists in a different form? Perhaps, then, as Marx said, the thing is not to theorize decolonization but, rather, to overthrow the very structure that periodically gives rise to pandemics.

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Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory

**With its unprecedented scale and consequences the COVID-19 pandemic has generated a variety of new configurations of media. Responding to demands for information, synchronization, regulation, and containment, these “pandemic media” reorder social interactions, spaces, and temporalities, thus contributing to a reconfiguration of media technologies and the cultures and politics with which they are entangled. Highlighting media’s adaptability, malleability, and scalability under the conditions of a pandemic, the contributions to this volume track and analyze how media emerge, operate, and change in response to the global crisis and provide elements toward an understanding of the post-pandemic world to come.**

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