



## **SYNOPSIS**

This is the story of over a century of colonial pillage and appropriation of African works of art by Europe, the story of the relentless struggle from Africa to recover them. It's also the story of the great museums that celebrate the classic African arts, yet jealously horde their treasures.

We often forget that the Western museums possess hundreds of thousands of objects and works that, for the most part, were taken from sub-Saharan Africa during the colonization period: masks, statues, jewels, animals, even human remains... During the era of nationalism, the European powers at the end of the 19th century competed to found the "universal" museums with the richest collections.

Since this era of pillages, the indigenous communities and countries struggle to recover the exiled works, the sacred objects of their ancestors. Europe has rarely accepted to hear these voices. Since the era of African Independences, and the work of UNESCO at the end of the 1970s, the approach of more official demands has taken root, and its story is still little known. The major museums of the West have always strongly resisted this call for justice.

In 2018, a report that was commissioned by the office of the French president and published by scholars Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy provoked a definitive meltdown: the era of permanent restitutions had begun. The European countries began to express willingness towards the return of the objects. On the continent, museums are emerging, ready to receive them.

Yet, somehow, the critical moment for action stretches out indefinitely, and the colonial spectre continues to haunt this geopolitical complex... Will the European states keep their promises?





### INTERVIEW WITH NORA PHILIPPE

The French President Macron made an announcement in 2017 at Ouagadougou, a promise that France will return all objects of African heritage in the near future. The subject seems to have sprouted out of nowhere, and has enormously agitated cultural and political circles. What brought you to work on this subject?

The subject leaped up at me when Savoy and Sarr's book was published in November 2018, the brilliant product of a report commissioned by Emmanuel Macron. I became aware of the extent of the colonial pillage that has occurred, for which many of our museums are now the treasure troves. I was even more flabbergasted because my studies in art history and museology never, for one minute, opened this chapter. In the field of museums, I was more familiar with issues concerning the indigenous collections of North American museums, for example, and the policies of restitution that have existed concerning them since the 1980s. But on this side of the world, I discovered that while demands for restitution have existed for a long time, they were systematically erased from history.

I see the future of restitutions as an immense cultural and political challenge that promises a renewal of the relationship between Europe and Africa, and even more: it's the opportunity for a reinvention of Europeans' relationship with their own history that is sorely needed.

Furthermore, I see here a story of struggle, and that's something I intend to recount in all my films. It's for this reason that from the very origin of this project, I chose the medium of television, in order to address a large audience, confident that it is possible to make a television film about this subject that does not serve as an instrument of the system. After all, Ryan Coogler's Black Panther opens with a scene in which a relic from the Kingdom of Benin is seized from the British Museum.

Tens of millions of people saw this film and were thus made sensitive to this cause. This history can no longer be treated as a niche subject.

The film is structured around a number of in-depth interviews with many personalities. On what basis did you choose them?

I chose the interviewed participants on the basis of their real engagement with this question and with the terrain. When I say "real", I don't mean opinion or simple discourse - I mean a developed perspective, anchored in long term research and praxis, whether political, artistic, judicial or historical, a perspective that takes the imperative towards restitution seriously. I mean the people who are already at work on this subject, the people that this subject requires. Besides Bénédicte Savoy and Felwine Sarr, who were the pillars of the work around the Savoy Sarr report, there are museum directors and curators, a philosopher, an art historian, an archeologist, an artist, politicians, a jurist, an anthropologist... The disciplines and angles that meet here are very diverse. The project even called for me to shoot interviews both in the United Kingdom as well as Cameroon, but the pandemic made that impossible.

One third of this film consists of archives, a very diverse array that sweeps through over 140 years of history. How did you conduct this research?

When one does archival research for a historical documentary, there are two dimensions. First, it demands that one gathers documentation in order to familiarize oneself with and become competent in the subject. This means frequent consultation of archives in all their forms: the printed word, photography, cartography, sound archive material, film archive material, etc. This phase of the work took two years. Then, there is the selection of the archival materials that most powerfully illustrate or demonstrate ideas, or carry narrative sequences, or reinforce certain emotions. In the case of this film, there was also a third challenge. We were dealing with archival material that was for the most part produced by or lent support to the colonial framework, material that was either distributed or destroyed with the precise structural purpose of maintaining the imbalance of power between the former colonizers and the former colonized. This necessitates that our analysis deconstructs their function or at puts their toxicity at distance. But first, it demands finding these archives!! For example, it is very difficult to

find images of the pillage of sacred indigenous objects by missionaries.

There is yet another dimension, which I could not explicitly embody in such a film of this scale: the recovery of the archives themselves is itself part of the demands of the former colonized people, right alongside the recovery of their works of art, their objects, and human remains. The access that I had to archives (which was very costly for the production) is a privilege that my colleagues in Tanzania or Cameroon do not possess. This is one of the inherent features of the restitution problematic.

Research into archives continued throughout the production of the film, over about two years, and benefited from the precious guidance of historians that specialize in the subject: Bénédicte Savoy was the most critical resource, and provided uncommonly generous and constant support, but there was also Gaëlle Baujean, Felicity Bodenstein... as well as the work of the archivist Alba Lombardia.

The film is also enriched by excerpts from cinematographic works. Amongst them is "Black Girl" by Ousmane Sembène, as well as sequences from "Statues Also Die" by Resnais and Marker...

I felt very attached to what the film would allow us to see and honor of the films that preceded it in this struggle, and they helped us to tell certain chapters of this history: the work of anti-colonial and then de-colonial militants, chapters in which the museums and their collections are protagonists. The film uses excerpts from the seminal film by Kader Attia, "The Object's Interlacing", which makes masterful use of the interview form, as well as "Palimpsest for Africa Museum", by Matthias de Groof, a remarkable documentary about the rehabilitation of the Museum of Tervuren, and also "Fang: An Epic Journey", by Susan Vogel. Furthermore there is the incredible film, "You Hide Me", by Nii Kwate Owoo, made in 1972. "Statues Also Die" constitutes the pivotal reference (it was produced in 1953 and was banned for over 11 years), as it explicitly demonstrates the connection between the model of the ethnological museum and the perpetuation of racism in French society.

There are very few images of the horror of the colonial period in the film. Why is that?

I did not avoid the question, but preferred to privilege speech rather than visual representation of the monstrosity of this violence. It didn't want to further contribute to this aggression by reproducing violent and spectacular images. I chose to retain just one unbearable image, of four French colonists in Ivory Coast, posing proudly with the decapitated head of a Black man on the end of a stick. The title inscribed beneath the photo indicates that this illustrates the repression of a « rebellion ». The commentary of the film insists on a clear idea: colonization implies mass murder, large scale political and economic operations, and of course, cultural pillage. It's the systematic and structural nature of the seizure of objects both cultural and sacred, including the traffic in human bodies that needs to be understood. Understanding this isn't a "side aspect" of the question. The very heart of the film's scenario is right there.

Your narration is chronological. Was your screenplay conceived this way from the very start? You could have made a film that showcases a debate of ideas, or a portrait of the museums concerned, but you chose an essentially historical perspective.

The film's through-line is chronological, but also involves a number of contemporary interludes, thus a back and forth between historical narrative and a much broader analysis. The challenge of the film is in its attempt to allow the emergence of a vision of the colonial genealogy of the ethnological collections of our museums. It also attempts to implant a certain understanding in the public consciousness - in some way, a discomfort. What have been so long considered as unquestionably luminous, virtual, and untouchable (things like Museums, and Culture), have yet to be interrogated, and must now, on the contrary, at last become a terrain of inquiry and change. The restitutions disturb the museums' landscape, transforming it into a field that is both public and civic, on the scale of the world itself. The stakes of this film center on the ability to make this movement perceptible to the audience and bring the subject of restitutions out from a perimeter that remains too technical.

I could have taken the narration even further back, but I chose a key star-



« Historians have very often overlooked that the pillage of cultural goods was a systemic dimension of the colonial project. » Bénédicte Savoy



ting point: the Berlin Conference, which, as Bénédicte Savoy points out, is a critical moment in the process of colonization, and thus of cultural pillage, as enshrined in the advent of the ethnological museums of Europe. The era of African Independences is another key moment which allows the restitutions to exist as formal demands made by official states.

It's interesting to note that one of the most frequent strategies of people opposed to restitutions depends on the denial of the long history of the demand, the claim that these requests are a recent trend, and that their treatment will require long reflection. Not at all! Scholars working on the subject have insisted upon this for a long time and this collective memory has been transmitted from generation to generation amidst the communities that were pillaged, a memory grounded in demands for restitutions, as well as resistance and protest against pillage that date back to their first instances.

The film also allows space for arguments against restitution. How did you choose the various speakers across the spectrum of this debate?

This is an important point: the arguments against restitution haven't changed much over the last four decades, which is why the film allows those voices to only be heard in the form of archives. The "anti-restitution" arguments still present themselves today as urgent and incontrovertible, and occupy the majority of media space. It's not very stimulating. What is interesting, however, is to perform some archeology, and explore the archives of French and German television, in order to recover shocking moments, particularly in the 80's and 90's where the European cultural and political elites would froth condescending and racist arguments about the inability of Africans to recover and care for their own heritage, or pronounce about France's mission to safeguard the cultural treasures of humanity. As we unearth these archival sequences, it becomes difficult to deny that Europeans are stalling.

You've decided to not use a studio backdrop or "neutral background" for the interviews with your 13 interlocutors. How did you choose the locations for the interviews?

The locations and their decor were critical for me, from the very initial

writing of the film. It allowed us to emphasize each interlocutor's origins and to work with the symbolic connotations of the locations (museum, office, library...). In a general way, it underscores the fact that all discourse is "contextual". In so doing, this allows the world to exist on its own terms, and permits a point of view about this world from an African perspective. I hope that the film is enriched by these "afrotopias" and that the location choices carry a deep meaning of attachment between beings and spaces, without restricting them therein. Furthermore, all our interlocutors were consulted about the choices of settings, camera angles, and framing.

The voiceover commentary speaks from the point of view of "We", throughout the film. Who are "We"?

This is the great challenge of the film! All throughout the debates around restitution on this side of the planet - in Europe, and here in France, African voices were very rarely heard, and when so, in a very limited way. We're still stuck in an inward gaze that is at best prudent, and at worst, arrogant. The goal of the film was to touch a European audience, because I work in Europe, and to allow them to hear points of view and testimonies emanating from Africa or its diasporas. The points of view of the European professionals are the majority voices heard in the press. This "We" is, therefore, that of a concerned European - European, not French, because colonization was a crime that was shared amongst the European nations - a « We » that possesses a spirit of responsibility for Europe's colonial past, and is concerned about how we can repair that relationship today, in a manner that is forward looking. Moving on and visions of the future cannot be spoken of without confronting the reparation imperative. There's absolutely nothing contradictory about that. On the contrary this is the very means by which we can truly embody a "we"!

In the film, this "We" is brought to life and spoken by Afro-descendants based in France, that goes without saying. Léonie Simaga, the extraordinary actor who reads the voice over, is an incarnation of this story between France and Mali. Thibault Kientz-Agyeman, the composer of the film's original soundtrack is an incarnation of



this story between Ghana and France. The role that European museums reserve for objects from Africa and elsewhere is reflected upon several times throughout the film: a young woman from Abidjan explains that their presence there is important, in that they allow expatriates from Ivory Coast to better know their culture, and Yala Kisukidi, born in Brussels, emphasizes the role that the Tervuren Museum had in her discovery of certain aspects of her Congolese roots.

# The subject is highly political and has been described as "sensitive". How did you go about the investigation?

The subject is considered sensitive in France because it's dealing with the recognition of colonial crime and the necessity of reparations, the very things the country has great trouble coming to terms with. In the museum world, many professionals expressed their fear to speak out on the topic, and some told me they'll only speak openly after retirement... Restitutions also open up into entire dimensions of diplomatic exchange with multiple aspects, zones that involve the sale of weapons, the interests of French industry, control of immigration, and the investments of the French Agency for Development in Africa. In France, the various ministries don't necessarily share the same agenda about this subject... Meanwhile, the elected legislative deputies sometimes feel manipulated by the Presidential Palace, which took a pro-active position around the dossier at the moment of the vote to return objects to Senegal and Benin, creating further resistance.

One can adopt one of two approaches to this question. Either one positions oneself completely in the framework of the restitution of objects, and rationalizes that their return cannot take place without some degree of "Real-politics", the closing of one's eyes on the rest, as long as the objects are returned. Otherwise, one adopts a more global, more moral position, defending the idea that the restitutions are the deep symbolic occasion to exorcise the (neo-) colonial phantom and renew relationship between a decolonized Europe and Africa, such that any restitution that needs to be accompanied by treaties that negotiate immigration policy to France does nothing to contribute to the dynamic.

From this perspective, Hamady Bocoum formulated a dream,

which is coherent with the discourse of Felwine Sarr: the return of works (objects and archives) that are constituent elements of African cultural histories, will allow the cultivation of seeds of self-esteem for today's youth that will blossom in their futures. In addition to many other beneficial changes, this reconnection with their cultural roots is in no way a regression into tradition, but rather a deepening of relationship between African youths and their continent...

#### What are your conclusions about the future concerning restitutions?

In 2021, I think we can speak in the present tense. In France, I'm not convinced that the political and cultural elite have begun to sincerely integrate the cause of restitutions, and the museums remain just as cautious. There is a tendency to speak rather of cooperation among museums or in the sciences rather than restitution, while these two notions aren't at all the same, even though one need not necessarily exclude the other. Nevertheless the restitutions to Benin that were celebrated in Paris in October 2021, open very promising horizons, because they were an opportunity for the President of the Republic to evoke the necessity of a larger legal framework: setting up an exceptional vote for each ensemble of objects seems inefficient and senseless... This legal framework is certainly what we should focus on right now.

In the larger Western world, the Savoy-Sarr report generated a wave of a new consciousness, and stimulated the founding of institutional programs into research about the origin of objects, a reinforcement of dialogue with African museums, and even the generation of some proactive policies of restitution, in certain museums in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. A powerful dynamic has been unleashed, and its expansion requires a relentless mobilization of citizens, intellectuals and politicians, all over the world. Chimamanda Adichie's magnificent speech at the Humboldt Forum in September 2021 echoes this same message. Africa is absolutely not waiting for us, and it has its own political and cultural priorities. Let us avoid enacting the sad spectacle of a Europe barricaded in a fading History, still clutching onto trophies of former conquest.







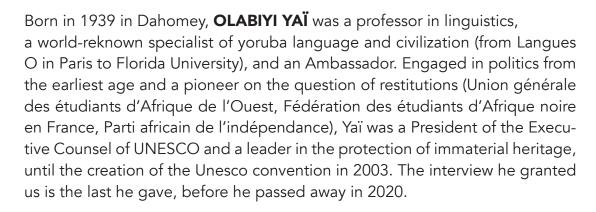


BENEDICTE SAVOY teaches Art History at Tecknische Universität in Berlin, and holds, in Paris, the international Chair of Cultural History of Artistic Heritage, 18-19th century. She is the author of numerous academic and literary books, among which Patrimoine annexé. Les biens culturels saisis par la France en Allemagne autour de 1800 (2003), Nofretete. Eine deutsch-französische Affäre, 1913-1931, Mona Lisa in Bangoulap (2016), Objets du désir, désir d'objets (2017), Die Provenienz der Kultur. Von der Trauer des Verlusts zum universalen Menschheitserbe (2018). In 2018, she publishes with Felwine Sarr Restituer le patrimoine africain, and, in 2021, Afrikas Kampft um Seine Kunst, a huge publishing success in Germany. In 2016, she was the recipient of the Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz award from the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft.

**MNYAKA SURURU MBORO** was born in Tanzania, and lives and works in Berlin since 50 years. First an engineer, he became a teacher in Mchagga and an activist. Along with Christian Kopp, he has cofounded the *Berlin Postkolonial* collective, which sheds light on the colonial past of the city, and works in particular on changing the name of streets that bear the name of colonial 'heroes'. It also focuses on the return of human remains to ex-colonies of Germany, the acknowlegment of the German genocide of the Herero and the Nama, and has campaigned against the opening of the Humboldt Forum.

**SILVIE MEMEL KASSI** is the head of the Abidjan Musée des Civilisations d'Abidjan since 2006. A Art historian and an internationally-respected museum professional, she has organized in her institution several major exhibitions about African art, in cooperation with Musée du Quai Branly and Musée ethnologique de Neufchâtel. In 2017, following pillages that happened because of a period of political instability the «Phantom Collection» project, in order to find again the lost artefacts.







**NANETTE SNOEP** is a Art Historian specializing in African Arts and a museum director. After 16 years spent at Musée du Quai Branly, she is appointed in 2015 director of an important consortium of ethnographic museum in Saxony. She has conceived a great number of acclaimed exhibitions, among which « Les Maîtres du Désordre » (Paris/Bonn/Madrid, 2012-13), « Vodou, L'Art de voir autrement » (Strasburg, 2013), « Megalopolis – Voices from Kinshasa » (2018). In 2019, she is appointed director of the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum, the ethnological museum of Cologne, and curates an ambitious program of exhibitions and events with a decolonial endeavor (in particular «Resist! L'art de la résistance»), open to restitutions.



Born in 1972 in Senegal, **FELWINE SARR** is a scholar and a writer. A seasoned economist, he has taught for a long time in France and Senegal, before joining Duke University in the USA, in 2020. He has published *Dahij* (2009), 105 rue Carnot (2011), Méditations africaines (2012), Afrotopia (2016), Habiter le monde (2017), and Restituer le patrimoine africain, cowritten with Bénédicte Savoy (2018), La saveur des derniers mètres (2021). A musician and a playwright as well, he signed with Dorcy Rugamba the play «Liberté, j'aurai habité ton rêve jusqu'au dernier soir» (Festival d'Avignon, 2021). He has founded and co-curates with Achille Mbembe the famous «Ateliers de la Pensée» in Dakar.



A scholar and anthropologist, **LARISSA FÖRSTER** dedicated her PhD to the question of the restitution of human remains, in particular from German collections towards Namibia and Australia. She has published and directed numerous reference books on provenance research in ethnographic museums and restitutions issues (*Provenienzforschung zu ethnografischen Sammlungen der Kolonialzeit. Positionen in der aktuellen Debatte*, 2018, et *Museumsethnologie: Eine Einführung. Theorien – Debatten – Praktiken*, 2019, avec I.Edenheiser). She is currently the first director of the Dept for Cultural Goods from Colonial Contexts, created in 2019 within the German Lost Art Foundation.



Born in 1957 in Podor (Senegal), a city which elected her as a mayor in 2009, AïSSATA TALL - a direct descendant of El Hadj Omar Tall - is a lawyer, a member of the Senegalese Socialist Party, and a former Minister of Communication under Abdoul Diouf's Presidency. She is now Minister of Foreign Affairs and Senegalese Abroad under Macky Sall's Presidency. She played her own role as a lawyer fighting for the cause of African independance and panafricanism in *Timbuktu*, a feature by Abderrahmane Sissako that premiered in Cannes in 2014.



**VINCENT NEGRI** is an academic at the Institut des Sciences sociales du Politique (CNRS). His research focuses on comparative Law and International Law in Culture and Heritage. He teaches at ENS Paris-Saclay and at Institut national du Patrimoine. Involved as an expert in heritage law-making in West Africa since 20 years, he was the counselor for the Sarr-Savoy mission on the judicial aspects of the Mission. Among his latest publications, we may mention the Code du patrimoine annoté et commenté (avec M. Cornu, 2018), and under his direction, La diversité dans la gouvernance internationale (2016), Le patrimoine archéologique et son droit (2015), and Normer l'oubli (co-dir. Schulte-Tenckhoff, 2019).





**EMMANUEL KASARHEROU** is a State museum curator, specialist of kanak arts and culture. At 23 only, he was appointed director of the Musée de Nouvelle-Calédonie, and, in 1998, head of the Centre Tjibaou and the Development Agency for Kanak culture, in Nouméa. He joins the Musée du Quai Branly in 2011 to become co-head of Collections, before being appointed President of the museum in 2020, as a successor to its first president, Stéphane Martin. It has been noted that he is the first Kanak personality to be the president of an important national institution.



**YALA NADIA KISUKIDI** is a philosopher, with a focus on Africana, and an Associate Professor at Université Paris-8. A specialist of Bergson (*Bergson ou l'humanité créatrice*, 2013), she has been a Professor at Collège international de Philosophie in Paris since 2013 («Universalism(s)» program), and has published a great number of decisive articles on African philosophies, and Black feminisms. She has taught in particular on Africa's futurities and « laetitia africana ». As a curator, she works closely with contemporary Congolese artists, and works for the Kinshasa Biennale.



**KADER ATTIA** grew up between France and Algeria, and, after graduating from Ecole des Arts-Décoratifs, he lived in Congo and in South America. Now based in Berlin, he has produced a vast and a multiform work (installations, videos, sculptures, collages, photographies...), which has been shown internationally, and was awarded, among many other important prizes, the Marcel Duchamp Award (2015). Subsequently, Attia founded La colonie(barré) in Paris. He has been working for a decade on the concepts of repair, reparation and restitution, and has dedicated a great number of works and exhibitions about ethnological collections, in particular African objects, and hybrid, «mutant» objects... «Remembering the Future» at Kunsthaus in Zürich in 2020 was a landmark exhibition on his oeuvre.



A Senegalese Scholar, **HAMADY BOCOUM** is an archeologist and currently head of the Musée des civilisations noires in Dakar, since its creation in 2018. From 2017 to 2018, he was the director of IFAN, in Dakar. He has published *The Iron Age in Senegal: History and Archeology* (2000) and, under his and A. Bazzara's direction, *From North to South Sahara: fifty years of French Archeology in West and Northern Africa* (2004). He is a regular speaker at international events and symposiums on Restitutions.



### THE DIRECTOR

A filmmaker, curator, and writer, Nora Philippe has directed « Like Dolls, I'll Rise » (2018), a short documentary dedicated to Black Dolls crafted by African-American women, which was selected in over thirty festivals in fifteen countries, « Job Center, Please Hang On » (released in theatres in France in 2014), and « The Ensorcery of James Ensor (ARTE, 2011). Her new TV documentary, « Restitution? », is broadcast on ARTE in 2021, and on Al-Jazeera (world), Black Public Media, New Zealand Sky, RTVE (Spain), RTS (Switzerland), SVT (Sweden), and TV5Monde (world). Pursuing her work on "archives ordinaires," material culture, and the intimate, she curated the « Black Dolls » exhibition at La maison rouge in Paris in 2018, and the exhibition « Repair & Stitches - Tafkik » at Cité internationale des arts (2021).

A graduate of the École normale supérieure in Art History, she co-edited several books, « A Black Doll Like Me » (2018), « Inventing Ancient Greek Painting » (2012), and is the author of « Dear Job Center » (2015). Nora Philippe has also produced over ten creative documentaries on social and cultural issues with her independent production company Les films de l'air and curates an annual original film series for La maison française at Columbia University.

An associate member of CNRS (French National Center for Research), she teaches filmmaking at the École des arts décoratifs de Paris and SciencesPo Lille.

## THE FILM'S CREW **Editing** Anne SOURIAU Barbara BASCOU Tania GOLDENBERG **Narration** Léonie SIMAGA **Original Score** Thibault KIENTZ-AGYEMAN **Scientific Counseling** Bénédicte SAVOY Photography Cécile BODENES Sound Claire-Anne LARGERON Jocelyn ROBERT Special effects and graphic design Denis PARROT **Archival Research** Alba LOMBARDIA Production Fabienne SERVAN-SCHREIBER @ Cinétévé Laurence MILLER **Production manager Judith MATHERON** Translation from French to English: Michelange Quay

## **RESTITUTION?**

A documentary film by Nora Philippe

Length: 83 mn.

Versions : Original version in French, Subtitled English version, German / Spanish / Swedish / Arabic dubbed version

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#### Presskit:

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