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Tinselwood

Marie Voignier

Producer Eugénie Michel-Villette, Vasillis Salpistis. **Production companies** Les Films du Bilboquet (Gouvieux, France), Bonjour Cinéma (Paris, France). **Director** Marie Voignier. **Director of photography** Thomas Favel. **Editor** Marie Voignier. **Sound design** Thomas Fourel. **Sound** Marianne Roussy.

Colour. 82 min. Bakwele, Bangando, Baka, French.

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World sales Les Films du Bilboquet

The ambassador used to come here often, say the young men rooting around with sticks in the undergrowth where the German cemetery used to be. But the treasures hurriedly hidden there by the colonial rulers before they fled are long since gone. And that's how the road to Yaoundé eventually became overgrown, the area and its inhabitants were left to fend for themselves.

This story functions like a historical sketch, which forms the basis for Marie Voignier to use the tools of cinema to get a grasp on southwest Cameroon. The camera gently follows the inhabitants around in their daily lives, and gives them the time and space to reflect upon their situations – without smoothing over the contradictions in which they sometimes lose themselves: in *Tinselwood*, a brutal colonial past forms the underpinning for a present in stasis. In the evenings, the television set flickers above them, broadcasting current news. The film is also a riposte to the small bright light emanating from the screen: with her consciously marked position as an outside observer, the director understands that larger-scale images are necessary to portray the complexity of all the nuances that lie between black and white.

Dorothee Wenner

The monumentalism of the tropical forest

The tropical forest in Cameroon extends over the whole south-eastern region and isolates it from the rest of the country. This forest has a colonial history: German colonisers set foot in the region toward the end of the 19th century, in search of rubber and other raw materials. The French drove them out and took their place after the First World War. As the region was sparsely populated, the colonial companies had trouble recruiting the labour power needed to exploit all the natural resources they were hoping to extract. As a remedy to this state of affairs, the German and French colonisers carried out over the years a systematic destruction of the local economy of self-subsistence. The inhabitants fit to work were arrested and compelled to toil in the mines, in the construction of roads, or in the collection and transport of rubber. The population was decimated by epidemics and exhaustion at work. When Cameroon became independent in 1960, the south-eastern region was in a state of depopulation, exhaustion, and misery never reached before. After a century of devastation, the local economy could not recover: know-how was not transmitted, and available wage labour at foreign timber and mining companies was very limited and badly remunerated. To top it all, without proper maintenance, the roads became almost inexistent and hardly usable, isolating the local population even more.

Today, as in the past, the forest is part and parcel of every existence and the core of every economic activity in the region. It remains the primary source of living for most of the population (cocoa plantations, farming, hunting) and constitutes a much-coveted reserve of wealth (wood, gold, mercury, diamonds) for foreign and Cameroonian capitalists alike.

The invisible scars

Tinselwood is a film about this forest and the people inhabiting it today. It tries to catch the human presence in its territorial and historical embeddedness, away from any kind of 'exotic' representation. In this tropical jungle, promises of prosperity fuse with the scars of history inscribed in the landscape – colonial scars, characterised by their invisibility: what was not accomplished, what was not said, what was expropriated. The narrative here occurs off-screen and takes the form of a dialogue between different scales and times, a weaving of actions and beliefs, a blend of memory and imagination.

Tinselwood proceeds in stages and layers. It delineates through subtle strokes the historical and political dimensions of the forest (wealth, culture, technology, sorcery). The characters themselves determine the course of the action and the way they interact with the forest and its elements – the camera takes on an observing stance, watching the bodies in their environment without imposing any interpretation. The editing, instead of focussing on single characters, gives precedence to the multiple, to the whole, thus enriching the texture with a wealth of crossings and encounters, both real and imaginary, and allowing for the emergence of hidden dialogues and perspectives between the scenes.

The forest is the beating heart of the film and its monumentality is imposed from the onset as the measure of everything else. Consequently, the delicate function of the framing and the sound in the film is to inscribe meaningfully in this massive landscape the tiny scale of the human body and its actions.

The unfolding and the organisation of the parts in *Tinselwood* seek to echo the lack of consistency in the development of

the region – an on-going legacy from the colonial period. The structuring principle of the film remains therefore implicit: to abstain from using a linear narrative, which would suggest the possibility of life in this region as a consistent and ordered succession of events. Nonetheless, this does not prevent the development of an intensive movement in the film. The flexible narrative form opens up a resonating space where (...) the people and their gestures are subtly inscribed in the larger history of their territory.

Marie Voignier



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Marie Voignier was born in 1974 in Ris-Orangis, France. From 1992 until 1997, she studied Engineering at the Université de Technologie in Compiègne, France. From 1996 until 1998, she studied Physics at the Technische Universität Berlin and Gender Studies at the Humboldt-Universität Berlin. From 1999 until 2004, she studied Fine Arts at the École nationale supérieure

des beaux-arts in Lyon, and she has been a professor there since 2011. Marie Voignier lives in Paris, where she works as an artist and filmmaker. *Tinselwood* is her second full-length film.

Films

2004: *The Ghosts* (13 min.). 2006: *Le Bruit du canon/The Cannon's Blast* (27 min.). 2008: *Au Travail/At Work* (47 min.). 2009: *Hinterland* (49 min.). 2010: *Hearing the shape of a drum* (17 min.). 2012: *L'Hypothèse du Mokele-Mbembe/The Mokele-Mbembe Hypothesis* (78 min.), *The Land Was Already Occupied (The Future)* (17 min.). 2013: *Standing Still* (14 min.). 2014: *One by One* (14 min., co-directed by Vassilis Salpistis), *Tourisme international/International Tourism* (48 min.). 2017: *Tinselwood*.