From Leopold III’s Masters of the Congo Jungle to Contemporary Congolese Eco-Cinema

Postcolonial Resonance

Matthias De Groof

In this chapter, I will have two films resonate with each other: a 1958 colonial film initiated by Leopold III called Les Seigneurs de la forêt [The Masters of the Congo Jungle], and a 2020 post-colonial Congolese film, Mother Nature, by Maisha Maene, produced by Yole!Africa in Goma. Both films were shot in eastern Congo, an area where ecological disasters were caused by colonial relations to nature and compounded by socio-economic and political conflicts. I will question how the films themselves are part of these relations, escape them, or provide alternatives.

The Masters of the Congo Jungle and Mother Nature could not be more different. The former is an international blockbuster and high-budget feature film from the late colonial period, while the latter is a local low-budget postcolonial short that sits completely outside the margins of canonical film history. What connects them, however, apart from the fact that they were both shot in eastern Congo, are the complex questions they raise about representations of nature that precede its colonisation. This analysis will be informed by (postcolonial) film theory and by the theoretical frameworks developed by Philippe Descola and Malcom Ferdinand in Par-delà nature et culture and Une écologie décoloniale. While the former helps us to understand different approaches to nature, the latter offer useful pointers to discern the residues of coloniality in these approaches.

By highlighting the echoes created by these two films, I am interested in discovering how the descendants of the people featured in Leopold’s film direct the camera towards their surroundings and, in doing so, exercise their media sovereignty today, even though Mother Nature does not constitute a direct response to the 1958 film. Can the animism attributed to the Masters of the jungle become a cinematic method allowing their descendants to transcend the coloniality of the 1958 film? And is Mother Nature an example of this? These are some of the main issues that I investigate in this chapter, which will be structured as follows:
Figure 1 Two posters from Les seigneurs de la fôret ['The Masters of the Congo Jungle'], 1958. Courtesy of Cinematek (Royal Film Archive). Copyright: Asbl Fondation Internationale Scientifique.
the first, and main ipart, focuses on Masters of the Congo Jungle, the context surrounding its creation, its characteristics and contradictions. This focus, however, will allow me, in the second part, to extend my analysis to eco-cinema in Congo (and specifically in Kivu) and draw useful lessons from Mother Nature.

**Masters of the Congo Jungle**

*Masters of the Congo Jungle* is a 1958 film initiated by King Leopold III. He wished to see a film that would capture the splendours of the Great Lakes region and the Virunga National Park in the former Belgian colonies. Originally called the Albert Park, this nature reserve is situated in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It was created in 1925 and is among the first protected areas in Africa. It covers an area of 8,090 km² and is listed in the List of World Heritage in Danger. Justin Mutabesha, the programme director of the Association of Young Visionaries for the Development of the Congo, says this park is home to a wealth of biodiversity, not just for Congo, Africa, or his community, but for the whole world.

*Masters of the Congo Jungle* is the first major Belgian production in Cinemascope. The filming took eighteen months and cost more than 60 million Belgian francs, which is the equivalent of 12 million euros and sixty times more than the average Belgian documentary today. Twentieth Century-Fox distributed the film in twenty-two languages and enjoyed immense success on its release. The film was referred to as ‘The Anti-Walt-Disney’ in the press. The *Daily Herald*, for instance, reported on 11 December 1959: ‘Leopold of the Belgians beats Disney at his own game and becomes KING OF THE JUNGLE FILMS […] Leopold makes Disney’s efforts look like a collection of old shots of the London Zoo taken with a box Brownie.’ This statement, however, does not take on board the fact that Walt Disney was invited to a private screening in the Castle of Laeken in 1958 and admired the film, according to Leopold’s daughter Esmeralda.

The film was accompanied by a photobook with fold-out pages and images both in colour and black and white, designed by Yves Delacre, written by Jacques Bolle, and initiated by the International Scientific Foundation, over which Leopold III presided. Although most of the pictures in the book were taken by the film’s two directors, five were taken by Leopold III, who joined the film expedition. By then, Leopold III had been forced to abdicate in favour of his son Prince Baudouin because of the controversy about Leopold’s alleged unconstitutional surrender to occupying Nazi Germany, his visit to Adolf Hitler, and his lack of gratitude towards allied forces and the resistance.
Nazi

The film was initiated by Leopold III, directed by Heinz Sielmann and Henry Brandt, narrated by Orson Welles and William Warfield, and produced by Henri Storck, after he took over from Gerard De Boe who was the initial co-director and executive producer of the film. According to his son Christian, Gerard De Boe was confronted during the shooting in the Belgian Congo with situations and practices he could not accept. After he repeatedly but fruitlessly urged his commissioner to settle matters, he handed in his resignation: ‘On the field things deteriorated. Having lost all control over Sielmann’s operations, De Boe and his main collaborators resigned as a group’, writes Francis Bolen. However, Frédéric Sojcher remarks that de Boe resigned because of the Nazi past of Ernst Schäfer (1910–1992), who was, alongside Leopold III, the film’s other spiritual father. Schäfer was also the film’s screenwriter and the scientific leader of the expedition. Before moving to Venezuela, he had been a German Nazi officer, working closely with Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler. Himmler ordered the execution of Leopold III and his family, but this didn’t happen because General George Patton’s troops had destroyed the telephone lines and the message never arrived. As a SS-Sturmbahnführer, Schäfer photographed medical experiments in Dachau and human skulls supporting Nazi racial theories.

After the war, Schäfer met Leopold on an excursion in the Orinoco in Venezuela. Little is known about this encounter. What is known, however, is that the idea of Masters of the Congo Jungle arose there. Schäfer was invited to Belgium to prepare the film and was a permanent guest at the Royal Castle of Laeken. He also had a luxurious workplace in the Royal Castle of Villers-sur-Lesse. Part of Belgian public opinion – especially among resistance circles – found Schäfer’s participation in the film unacceptable. Thus, the film was controversial from its premiere, which was intended to take place at the Brussels’ world fair of 1958. The political scandal took on an international dimension. At the gala premiere in Amsterdam, the appearance of Leopold III and his wife Lilian de Réthy, who had been invited by the Dutch Queen Juliana and Prince Bernhard, was cancelled due to so-called ‘unforeseen circumstances’.

Colonial

The film is highly colonial. Orson Welles’s omniscient, authoritarian, White, and slightly paternalistic narrative voice takes the viewer to a nostalgic Rousseaute-like era of virginal pristine wilderness that has not been part of Western ‘progress’. The camera objectifies, exoticises, and eroticises nature and culture under the guise of science. The Daily Herald of 11 December 1959 states:
Leopold wanted to film the traditional love-dance of the girls of the Watutussi tribe. This [choreography] imitates the mating procedure of a bird called the crown crane. He decided that the best girls for the job were the sixth-form Watussi pupils of a convent. Leopold wanted them to dance in traditional costume. And he talked the authorities into it – quite a feat, since ‘traditional costume’ is a cotton skirt and nothing else. And these girls are normally muffled up to the eyebrows.  

Landscapes are regarded as relics of deep time and prehistoric past that are embedded in stories of human evolution. The human, then, is seen as a de-historicised ‘noble savage’, ‘closer to nature’, or ‘in balance with nature’. In the park – a living museum – ‘contemporary ancestors’ were invented as living fossils who provided access to humankind’s biological and cultural past.

The very idea of the film is hyper-colonial: a salvage ethnography combined with a salvage biology. What is in danger of being lost should be recorded while completely being part of the system (i.e. imperialism) that accelerates the threat. ‘The world is evolving so fast nowadays that I thought it desirable to record the remains of the thousand-year-old Congo on audio and film,’ writes Leopold. Malcom Ferdinand calls these salvages iterations of the colonial environmentalism of Noah’s ark, in contrast to decolonial and ecological perspectives from the enslaved persons in the hold of the slave ship. Whereas the former narrowly focuses on ‘nature’, the latter thinks social and environmental justice together, while focusing on the world as a whole. Ferdinand indeed makes a distinction between, on the one hand, environmentalism that focuses on conservation but perpetuates the colonisation of nature (see Maëline Le Lay’s chapter in this volume) through its instrumentalisation of non-humans, its nature/culture dichotomy, and its universalist position, which occults colonial, patriarchal, and the slavery foundations of modernity; and, on the other hand, an ecology that addresses the colonial roots of ecocide, and proposes a living-together that sees social justice as inseparable from ecological justice.

The film presents the territory as if it were not occupied and as if it remained outside of the colonial endeavour of appropriation. This approach entirely serves colonial self-imagery. The cinematic construction of a fictional outside-ness that remains untouched is fundamentally colonial as a necessary propagandistic counterpoint to the annexation, land clearing, and massacres outside of the ‘reserve’. It serves as the necessary opposite to what Malcom Ferdinand calls ‘matricide’, the colonial assassination of Mother Earth. This eco-logical matricide includes epistemicide (the destruction of logos, cosmogonies, and mythopoesis, which the film now promotes) as well as infanticide (the uprooting and displacement of first land defenders from their oikos, and the erasure of
the idea that the inhabitants of these lands) – which the film now portrays – are
the children of these lands.\textsuperscript{24} This matricide was never the subject of colonial
filmmaking, but appeared unintended in some films.\textsuperscript{25}

The ‘taxidermy’\textsuperscript{26} of \textit{Masters of the Congo Jungle} constructs a dichotomy
between, on the one hand, the depicted Lega, Nyanga, Komo, and Twa protagonist
ists who are called \textit{seigneurs de la forêt} [the masters of the jungle] in the film,
and Belgian audiences, on the other. The latter are comforted with the idea of
being the veritable masters of the jungle. After all, the Congo was then the Bel
gian Congo, and Virunga was still called Albert Park. Cinema not only brought
the colony home but also increased the self-perception of the users who now
realised they were part of the colonial power. The immersive widescreen for
mat of CinemaScope and the intended setting of the film’s premiere – the 1958
Brussels world fair\textsuperscript{27} – makes this meta-message even more convincing for the
viewer.\textsuperscript{28} Essentially, the film celebrates fifty years of the Congo’s annexation to
Belgium. But more importantly, and like all world and universal exhibitions, the
’58 fair made the ideology of progress tangible and contrasted it with a fictitious
construction of savagery in order to legitimise the brutal intervention. In 1958,
a ‘human zoo’ was located right below the Atomium, the 102-metre-high icon of
the 1958 world fair depicting atoms and expressing a faith in scientific progress
(see Sarah Arens’s chapter in this volume). Both aspects were also mediated by
films like \textit{Masters of the Congo Jungle}. CinemaScope technology embodies the
idea of scientific progress and privileges an (albeit aesthetic) access to the ‘real’,
a reality and alterity constructed in opposition to the idea of progress, which
thereby makes this very idea even more palpable. Through \textit{Masters of the Congo
Jungle}, the world became once again more visible, viewable, and accessible,
albeit staged. The contrasting construction of otherness in space, and its denial
of coevalness was painfully repeated in 2002 in Belgium, when Baka peoples
from Cameroon were exposed in an animal park. The entrance ticket for adults
was 6 euros and 3.5 euros for children. The exhibition was severely criticised by
the Belgian-African League for the Restoration of Fundamental Freedoms in
Africa\textsuperscript{29} and the New Migrants Movement\textsuperscript{30} who wondered if there is compatibi
lity between humiliation and humanitarian action.\textsuperscript{31}

\textbf{Pangolin}

\textit{Masters of the Congo Jungle} attributes a central place occupied by the pangolin
(\textit{ikaga} in Lega and \textit{Manis Smutsia Gigantea} in Latin), a contradictory animal,
just as the film itself is contradictory, as we will see. The film tells the story of
this sacred animal that was never to be hunted. Yet a pangolin accidentally died
during a hunt:
The sacred animal, coming from the depths of time, is the unexpected victim of the trap set by the young men. The forest becomes silent; nothing will take place anymore, all activities are suspended, because the pangolin is an animal full of omens.\textsuperscript{32}

The prohibited and taboo animal was dead. To ritually dispose of the pangolin, the presence of all clans is required. The pangolin is placed on a few branches and laid out 'like a king'. A noble and intense dance follows. The dancers show that the leaves acting as tiles of their houses are arranged as suggested by the superimposition of scales on the back of the pangolin. To violate the pangolin taboo is to expose oneself to the serious disapproval and sanctions of public opinion. Most often, a hunter would be forced to leave his group, writes the Belgian anthropologist Daniel Biebuyck who was part of the film crew in charge of its ethnography.\textsuperscript{33} The pangolin is taboo because of the animal's contradictions. The pangolin is an anomaly and an in-betweenness. It does not neatly fit into categories. It has scales but it's not a fish. It looks like a lizard but is actually a mammal; unlike other small mammals, but like humans, it produces mostly one offspring at a time. So it's sort of partly fish and partly human, but it also climbs trees. When threatened, it rolls itself into a ball rather than running away.\textsuperscript{34} The pangolin is an animated person. Like the human animal, the pangolin owns a mind. This is the reason why eating one outside a ritual context is unimaginable in the Lega communities. Today, the pangolin – who got much attention as one of the possible carriers of Covid-19 and thought of as a possible origin of the pandemic\textsuperscript{35} – is the most illegally trafficked mammal in the world and is threatened with extinction. Between five hundred thousand and 2.7 million pangolins are captured each year in the forests of Central Africa.\textsuperscript{36}

The Film's Contradictions: Colonial Anticolonialism

Like the pangolin, the film is itself fraught with contradictions. The most apparent of these, on which I shall focus here, is that this colonial film is actually also anti-colonial – because it criticises the civilising mission – while, at the same time, not applying to itself the lessons it teaches. By juxtaposing the myth of progress with that of savagery, \textit{Masters of the Congo Jungle} is situated at the heart of an ideological fantasy of empire. Simultaneously, however, this film explicitly denounces these myths by combining anticolonial and anti-extractivist discourses. The central aim of the film was to raise awareness of the role humans play in disrupting the natural balance, and the film makes clear that this disruption is caused (or at least accelerated) by colonial extractivism: ‘Thoughtlessly, civilisations […] have taken without restraint from natural resources, and we
see destruction accompanying opulence. In the photobook, we furthermore read that the balance in nature cannot be modified with impunity. Today, at great expense, attempts are being made to repair the faults of the past; very often, one is forced to be satisfied with limiting the damage because it seems that in the twentieth century, man can do anything, except rebuild what he has destroyed in Nature.

Elsewhere, Leopold III says:

The unbridled capitalism of our society, coupled with rampant individualism, will one day plunge us into a serious crisis. [...] The way of life of those peoples, whose ancestral traditions and culture are so rich, give us much food for thought.

Leopold III contrasts Western ‘civilisation’ (historic modes of capital accumulation, slavery, colonialism, empire, extractivism, productivism, and consumerism, or in short, the project called ‘the West’), with the civilisation of the seigneurs, thereby presenting their way of life as a salvation. ‘The communion of the man of the forest with nature, which he respects’, Leopold wrote, ‘constitutes for us a great lesson and a spiritual heritage.’ The ‘salvation’, or antidote for this malpractice, are the seigneurs: the Lega, Nyanga, and Twa who offer new non-European imaginaries, epistemologies, ontologies, and counter-narratives that would now be qualified as decolonial ecologies, and presented as key to ecological challenges today as they were in 1958. Indigenous knowledge being key to the environmental struggle today is a reversal we also observe during colonial times and which states that the West should be developed and educated by the indigenous, rather than the other way round.

As answer to colonial ways of inhabiting the earth, Masters of the Congo Jungle proposes a decolonial ecology as a world-making that is situated prior to the colonial/environmental fracture. The film therefore starts and ends with cosmology and mythology even though the accompanying book states that ‘Our understandings of the people of the forest only reach the vulgar stage’. Nevertheless, the film advocates a matricial relationship to the Earth and a communion between man and nature. This communion, beyond the (naturalist) culture/nature dichotomy, is part of what French anthropologist Philippe Descola calls animism. The shared interiority entails a relationship to lands, places, non-humans in which humans do not occupy the centre of creation to order the structures for their benefit through commodification, exploitation, or...
extraction. This idea is somehow romanticised and simplified in the film in a normative way:

For [Les Seigneurs], the animal is not […] that thing which one sees at the end of a gun, or in the bottom of a dish; but it is, full of complex meanings, a sort of intermediary, between LIFE, in the universal sense, and humankind.\(^47\)

(De)Colonial Ecologies in Masters of the Congo Jungle

On 14 December 1959, The Times reported that there were nature films that denied the existence of man, others that made sensitive people feel like apologising for belonging to the human race, and still others that made the public feel that all kinds of creatures – from lions to insects – ‘are being prodded and provoked into unnatural combats’.\(^48\) Masters of the Congo Jungle, The Times continued, was none of those. The communion between the man of the forest and his natural surroundings, a point evidenced in every second of the film, implies (rather than asserts) a deliberate cry of protest against the brutal greed of men. The accompanying photobook confirms this view by stating that the poetry of the film owes nothing to ‘the inspiration of a vulgar anthropomorphism, so widespread in books and films of scientific appearance, where man and animal alike are scorned’.\(^49\) That’s why the film was referred to as ‘The Anti-Walt-Disney’ in the press.\(^50\)

Nevertheless, I argue that the decolonial ecologies as described above are diluted or even nullified by the framing of the film and its colonial grammar:

Factually, writes Ferdinand, the environmentalist perspective of a return to nature has often been translated by a colonial grammar aimed at violently appropriating a space and forcefully projecting the fantasies and modes of occupation of one group onto another. This was the case with the ideology of wilderness, where the creation of parks was synonymous with the expulsion, not only of Native Americans in the United States, but also of local communities in India, Tanzania or South Africa.\(^51\)

An ever-increasing literature denounces environmental colonialism,\(^52\) including on Virunga, specifically. But what interests us here is Masters of the Congo Jungle’s specific filmic grammar. Is the film similar to a museum, which, as Aimé Césaire describes, ‘present for our admiration, duly labeled, […] dead and scattered parts [of non-European civilizations, for] smug self-satisfaction [and] secret contempt?’\(^53\) Is the film, in Audre Lorde’s words, a ‘Master’s House’,
exhibiting the results of its ‘hunting and collecting’? Is this film ‘cynema’, that is, filmmaking that hunts? We have already discussed the ways in which this film is a classic example of colonial representation. I would add that this colonial dimension is also noticeable in its production, sponsors, commercial intent and in the fact that animals were captured to facilitate the shooting process. What retains our attention is how the film contradicts – and even cancels out, neutralises, and annihilates – the animist proto-filmic ‘communion between man and nature’ as described by The Times, by an opposing ‘ontology’ that, however, remains off-screen. In his vast production, Descola called this the ‘naturalist’ ontology. Here, the non-human is not an animal but a beast without a mind. The human becomes human in contradistinction to the beast (which it can then domesticate or consume as mere resource). ‘Enlightened’ humans elevate themselves above an artificial boundary called ‘nature’, but those who do not adopt this naturalisation of difference are denied full humanity. Now, the artificial border, however, is also already inscribed in the cinematographic medium itself. Challenges that border by different modes of filmmaking may require its opposing ontology, namely animism, since animism makes this nature/culture border porous.

**Congolese Eco-Cinema Today**

How to explain the contrast between the pangolin taboo that existed in 1958 and the fact that this animal is now the most illegally trafficked mammal in the world? This radical switch points to an abandonment of the world view as depicted in the 1958 film in which, for the seigneurs, hunting should never exceed the needs of life.

One possible answer is green imperialism. Turning land into ‘nature reserves’ was a reformist measure to the rapid and alarming decline of ecosystems due to colonial destruction by extractivist activities, ranging from plantations to mining. Even though this salvage is accompanied by the cinematic exoticisation and romanticising of indigenous life forms as being in harmony with ‘nature’ and presented as salvation of decadent modernity, the communities themselves were often expelled from the parks. In the case of the Virunga, chiefs signed treaties, which are questioned again today. The Congo Research Group writes:

As documented by several scholars, including Paul Vikanza and Joseph Nzabandora, the creation of the park was characterized by contestations, which partly resulted from the displacement of populations without compensation, and several extensions of the park without much consultation of
local stakeholders. […] While the idea of nature conservation is generally supported, and people are proud of the park, seeing the wildlife as their heritage, many feel that the park has expropriated their ancestral lands.58

Historian Raf De Bont confirms:

Although the transnational network of conservationists often represented the area as an empty wilderness, it contained substantial human populations, particularly after the park’s enlargement in 1929. To restore the park’s primitive character, its administration set up eviction schemes, affecting thousands of individuals from the local […] population. A small group of Twa—represented as noble savages—were allowed to stay, but their freedom to use the park’s resources was increasingly restricted over time.59

In the twenty-first century, similar buyouts have occurred within the Emission Trading System, offsetting the emissions of big polluters that land-grab territories, reclassify them as carbon sinks, and push the forest-dependent peoples out of their previous – often sustainable and low carbon intensive – ways of life.60 These forest-dependent communities understand very well that the violence inflicted upon them is the flipside of a corporate disregard for the earth’s ecosystems.61 But unable to defend their oikos, these new ways, then, include the destruction of that same oikos through illegal poaching (e.g. of the Pangolin), working on the adjacent monocultural plantation, cutting trees to sell charcoal, and trafficking minerals, thereby contributing to the ecological degradation of their land. If not made into scapegoats by privileged city dwellers who perform labour that is seemingly less directly devastating, those still living in the vicinity of the park (rather than being confined to suburbs) are re-educated by NGOs advising them against cutting trees or poaching. Both ways help to distract attention from the industrial extractivism that was the cause of ecological destruction in the first place. In a context where climate change has become a crucial issue, these industries ironically continue to mine strategic minerals that are essential to post-carbon growth. A 2020 report from the European Commission states:

For electric vehicle batteries and energy storage, the EU would need up to 18 times more lithium and 5 times more cobalt in 2030, and almost 60 times more lithium and 15 times more cobalt in 2050 compared to the current supply to the whole EU economy.62

Given this predicament, is present Congolese eco-cinema produced by the descendants of the Lega, Nyanga, and Twa protagonists – who are not the sei-
gneurs anymore – able to forge a matricial bond with the earth, in contrast to the aforementioned matricide of the colonial habitat? Can this cinema recreate a ‘Mother Earth’ that constitutes the womb of existence and give rise to a matrigenesis through new world-making that advances environmental justice as an extension of the struggle against coloniality? Or, conversely, is present Congolese eco-cinema more ‘environmental’ than ‘ecological’; and, as such, unable to denounce the colonial causes of this disruption while remaining focused on the symptoms that allow to scapegoat local communities? Either way, to answer the first question, whether this body of work is environmental cynema or ecological cinema, one needs to add a second question: do these films escape fulfilling a ‘salvage’ role for mere scopophilic surplus value of audiences that enjoy environmental privilege in the Global North (and in the north of the South)? If contemporary Congolese eco-cinema does succeed in transcending the contradictions of Masters of the Congo Jungle, how do spectators avoid seeing the films as salvation of a (yet accelerated) decadent consumerist ‘modernity’? In sum: how do these films resonate with the past?

Given the limited number of Congolese eco-films, and since the corpus is still increasing, it is not our goal to give definitive answers to these questions. Congolese films with an explicit or implicit ecological message or films offering or producing eco-perspectives on the relations between the human and non-human include Machini (2019) by Têtshim and Mukunday, which shows how mines extract life from bodies; Kapita (2020) by Petna NdaliKaton-dolo, which reveals how colonial film camouflaged this violent extractivism in the mines from which multinationals obtain their supplies; Pungulume (2016) by Sammy Baloji, which shows social and cultural disruption as consequences of this industrial colonial extraction; and Postcolonial Dilemma: Parts I–III (2021) by Kongo Astronauts, which represents waste and pollution through electronic debris as aesthetic tropes. Other Congolese eco-films exist, and ecocritical analysis could be unleashed on virtually any Congolese film. Furthermore, I will not discuss ‘Green Savior Complex’ videos; NGO films such as Fossil Free Virunga (2021), a story of climate activists fighting for social and environmental justice in the DRC; or the Western films on Congolese environment that repeat the salvage ecology, such as Virunga (Orlando von Einsiedel, 2014).

Instead, I will briefly focus on the experimental short film Mother Nature (2020) by Maisha Maene. Through its aesthetics of bodies drenched in oil, the film explicitly refers to the threats facing the Virunga Park, as it is being turned into a huge oil field by corporate businesses such as Eni, Efora, Total, SOCO, and Dominion Petroleum with the help of the Congolese Ministry of Hydrocarbons, which has granted exploration permits covering 85 per cent of the park’s area. The extraction of its vast quantities of untapped oil risks provoking an
Figures 2-4. Still from the film *Mother Nature*. 6'14", 6'46", 8'00". Copyright and courtesy: Maisha Maene.
ecocide on a regional level, which can spill over as far as the Mediterranean Sea and cause the displacement of entire communities. Furthermore, by speculating on the financial return of not already running but proposed plants, and thus by willing to take global warming beyond two degrees, these companies precipitate the death sentence of countless of people across the world, especially in the most vulnerable areas, such as the DRC, which is one of the countries that has least contributed to global carbon emissions.

The film *Mother Nature* was selected at festivals such as Congo in Harlem (New York), Digital Gate International Film Festival (Algeria), Leida Internationale Art Film Festival (Spain), Congo International Film Festival in Goma, and AfroBrix (Italy). Maene is part of the Komon community whose chiefdom is located at the foot of the Nyiragongo volcano in the Virunga Park. The film is produced by Yole!Africa and Alkebu Film Productions, founded by acclaimed filmmaker Petna Ndaliyo Katondolo in 2000. Through its film and media institute and its projects ALT2TV, ART, on the FRONTLINE and Alkebu Film Productions, Yole! gathers Congolese activists and filmmakers to create awareness through film. Throughout its two decades of existence, Yole!Africa has influenced government, public health, journalism, and other initiatives in non-violent resistance. Yole!Africa operates from Goma, the capital of North Kivu province, bordering the Virunga National Park. The Kivu region is particularly relevant in terms of extractivism, armed conflict, ecological disasters, and social disruption. And Yole!Africa represents innovative ways in which films deal with colonial legacies and their paradoxes, such as the so-called green economy but also a context in which extractivism continues to produce environmental ravages. Their films are made in places where activists continue to defy extractive industries, protest against logging, mining, and pollution and block land seizures that are violently pursued to produce goods commonly consumed in the Global North.

The film opens with a reflection of a boy in a puddle (Fig. 5). This image – which typifies the aesthetics of Congolese photographer and filmmaker Kiripi Katembo – is an ambiguous one, in which the foreground and background seem to be interchangeable. Due to the anthropocentrism of the viewers, they interpret a human being in a first moment while the perception of another element precedes this interpretation. The perception of what is considered the background is actually the foreground, and this element makes the interpretation possible in the second instance. An ecological relation is thus represented within an ecology of relations between foreground and background. Then, the boy looks in the puddle, holding a ball.

A second image shows Nuru. She is looking straight into the camera. This direct visual address is a second form of reflexivity and breaks through the cin-
ematic fourth wall” because it makes contact with the viewer. The woman walks with the steering wheel as if she was driving a car, but without any direction. Continuing to steer without a car stands for the illusory belief in ‘progress’. She ‘drives’ between the chunks of coagulated lava that the Nyiragongo spat out. A little later, she is soaked in fossil fuel and walks with a burning oil lamp in broad daylight. She feels like she is already in a devastated world. A pair of sunglasses obscures her gaze. Armed blue helmets pass by, and surrounding people take pictures of Nuru. On the way, she stops to observe an artist, performed by Primo Mauridi. The artwork shows a chained man holding a globe and looking at it. He is chained among polluting industries. On the hills, only one tree remains, but pangolins are all extinct. At the bottom we see a timeline towards the future: 2050, 2100, … The man turns out to be the boy who was looking at his ball. This ball was made of scrap and rags and represents the damaged planet. We see accelerated urban landscapes with automated traffic controllers. The man looks through the puddle to a nocturnal Afrofuturistic scene in which a woman with visible power ornaments and traditional costume is flanked by two people looking directly at the camera. According to Maene, her hands in front of her belly indicate the possibility of being reborn when taking matters into one’s own hands. Finally, the man leaves the puddle, walks away, and arrives in a green, lush, and thriving environment. A plant with roots is offered to him. Planting the tree is planting consciousness.

Figure 5. Still from the film Mother Nature. 0’36”.
Copyright and courtesy: Maisha Maene.
Although the film does not offer a clear analysis of environmental injustice, eco-colonialism, green imperialism, climate apartheid, or environmental racism, it nevertheless provides an antidote to the hegemony of the coloniality of nature by relating to the plant as nucleus of a future. Interestingly, this process is mediated through precolonial cosmologies as reshaped by Afrofuturist aesthetics. In contrast to a colonial heart-of-darkness environmentalism, Mother Nature does not desperately try to find solutions in the militarisation of parks, or reduce the habitat to carbon sinks. Nor does it prioritise Western environmental knowledge or further the exploitation of nature through techno-fixes. On the other hand, the film does not reproduce the nativist and revivalist idea of a ‘nature people’ in which the ‘ancestors’ are presented as immune to capitalist civilisation. On the contrary, Nuru is literally drenched in the dark side of industrial capitalism. Also, the film does not reduce Mother Nature to the caring and reproductive functions often ascribed to this Mother Earth trope. Of course, the maternal vision of earth is normatively gendered, as are Ferdinand’s derived notions such as ‘matricide’, ‘matrigenesis’, and ‘matricial’. However, it is not translated into a binary patriarchal or phallocentric construct, let alone matriarchy.

The aesthetic tropes in Mother Nature of being soaked in oil (and its derivatives) and life-giving plants are shared by Extinction Rebellion (XR) Goma whose activists reconnect the environment with population and environmental justice with social justice. ‘We cannot pretend to protect the Virunga National Park if we do not want to respond to the clear demands of the populations bordering the park’, says Pascal Mirundi, one of the founders of XR Université de Goma. In addition to raising awareness among the population, XR also lobbies for a participatory management plan between the population and the parks.

It seems thus that, at least for this case in point of contemporary Congolese eco-cinema, Mother Nature does transcend the contradictions of Masters of the Congo Jungle. But does the film nevertheless risk fulfilling a ‘salvage’ role? As for this concluding question, Maene contests the idea of the film as a disengaged and comforting spectacle, since it was used to spark discussion in the first place. These interactions, in contrast to the screenings of Masters of the Congo Jungle in 1958, cannot be determined by a metanarrative that constructs a naturalist dichotomy between here/now and there/then, which neutralised the on-screen animist communion. The interactions are different, not primarily because the people on-screen who take pictures of Nuru are the same people that engage in discussions on the film and on pollution. The dichotomy is removed first and foremost because of the pollution itself. As is increasingly evident, pollution is present in every cell of what was previously called nature. When this pollution is due to historic colonialism or to the broader colonisation of the non-human, we can safely say (from ecocritical, political ecological, or environmental
humanities perspectives) that postcolonial resonances are omnipresent. Since anthropogenic pollution automatically makes the border between ‘human’ and ‘nature’ porous, the artificial boundary that was constructed through films such as *Masters of the Congo Jungle* to distinguish (on-screen) ‘nature’ from audiences who feel they ‘master’ nature and can partake in its colonisation become obsolete in *Mother Nature*.

Nature is not imagined, invented, or constructed outside of industrial and colonial pollution. Can we still speak of animism here as the way to transcend the naturalist artificial boundary between nature and culture, a boundary that was still materialised by the silver screen on which *Masters of the Congo Jungle* was projected? Or should we speak of inanimism as lacking the quality of life due to pollution? (In)animist shattering the nature/culture divide is even more clearly thematised in Tetchim and Mukunday’s short *Machini*. In that film, rocks from which humans are made are extracted by a machine whose pollution contaminates the humans who are consumed by that machine, which eventually extracts life from bodies. In any case, Maene’s filmic gesture ascribes agency to nature, and makes human and non-human worlds permeable, and in this manner, Maene conveys the two key components of animism. As such, the animist gesture is an antidote to the objectification, exploitation, and alienation that characterise colonial relationship with nature in the so-called ‘Anthropocene’? In the words of Japanese filmmaker Miyazaki Hayao, ‘Animism will be an important philosophy for humanity in the 21st century […] because it can address profound scepticism about modern civilization […] limitations to the materialistic aspects of human society, and the poor condition of the earth’?78

In sum, it seems that *Mother Nature* reveals the choice between animate plants and thus giving future a life, breath, soul,79 and the inanimate fossil fuel as ‘decayed remnants of long-dead life-forms’80 destroying life. Or to put it in Naomi Klein’s words: between a society of grave robbers and a society of life amplifiers.81 Filmmaking in the ‘Congocene’82 returns to animism as described by Sergei Eisenstein as reconciliation of humanity and nature:

the ‘animation’ of nature emanates from here: nature and the I are one and the same, further along they are identical, even further they are similar. Up to the stage where the difference is sensed, they all work on the animation of nature, on animism.83
Conclusion: (In)animist Pollution

*Masters of the Congo Jungle* is an example of the naturalist representation of the relations between humans and nature in the late colonial era. Despite the representation of other ontologies such as animism, naturalism is dominant on-screen through an othering, a salvage narration, and objectifying visual registers. The context of the 1958 screenings, where audiences are constructed as the real masters, reinforced this dimension. The screen itself literally became the border that, like a mirror, is both constitutive and critical of the myths of progress. The range of resonances between, on the one hand, this colonial/modernist myth and, on the other, its self-critique, which instrumentalises non-Western paradigms, corresponds to the different dominant modes of dealing with the ecological crisis today and provides the scope in which dissensus is allowed.

With *Mother Nature*, however, we go further. Pollution, in its indiscriminate contamination, negates binaries and makes the naturalist hyper-separation between culture and nature superfluous. Animism as challenging the Western dualistic view of the world and the interrogation and disruption of the fundamental assumptions of modernity, here, is distinct from the communal animism as represented in *Masters of the Congo Jungle*, which remains framed within the nature/culture divide. Whereas *Masters of the Congo Jungle* translates a Eurocentric understanding of animism in which it is modernity’s antithesis,⁸4 *Mother Nature* conveys the idea of a critical brand of animism that is meshed within modernity. Animism as a way to survive modernity is linked to the inevitable shattering of the nature/culture dichotomy due to pollution. This critical animism is thus at the same time inanimating, as became clear with the pangolin’s fate and the ensuing pandemic. The postcolonial resonances, then, consist in a historic reversal: whereas the West constructed an idea of nature through representation that allows nature to be colonised, contaminated nature now colonises us.
Notes

5. 'King of the Jungle Films,' The Daily Herald, 11 December 1959.
17. Ibid., 60–62.
18. ‘King of the Jungle Films’.
20. Esmeralda and De Gryse, Mijn vader, p. 138. All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.
22. Although Ferdinand’s book rethinks ecology from the Caribbean world, and his examples are mostly drawn from this context, the aforemen-
38. Ibid., p. 8.
40. Esmeralda and De Gryse, Mijn vader, p. 12.
42. Ferdinand, Une écologie décoloniale, p. 461.
47. Bolle, Les Seigneurs de la forêt, p. 68.
49. Bolle Les Seigneurs de la forêt, p. 11.
55. “To hunt” is derived from “hound”, κυ- (kun-), stem of κυων (kōn, “dog”).
60. “Many of the Nande but also a few Hunde and Hutu peasants that formerly cultivated illegally in the area feel ‘trapped’, as they are now forced now to work for large-scale land-owners under exploitative agreements.” Ibid.
61. Ferdinand, Une écologie décoloniale, p. 308.
64. De Groof, ‘Review: Kapita’.
66. These include David Shongo’s A62 (2019). This film, whose title sounds like “acide” in French, gives voice to kids who turn out to be completely aware of the toxic environment they live, work and play in. Mines de Roi by David-Douglas Masamuna Ntimasiemi (2015) explores child labour in the mines of Katanga, giving further voice to the victims of the mining area. Kiripi Katembo also deals with these topics in Après-Mine (2010). See also: Entreprise de consommation (2021) by Elise Sawasawa, Derrière nos portables (2017) and Kishumpo (2018) by Eli Maene.


70. In 2018, for instance, the average Canadian pol lut ed 517 times more CO2 than the average Congolese. Source: The World Bank.

71. Breaking the fourth wall is the temporary sus pension of the convention in which an imagined wall (i.e. the screen in the cinematic arts) separates the audience from the (illusory) world pre sented by the film.


73. The year 2021 saw the visit of American Special Forces, not only to fight the invisible and fabricated ISIS-DAESH, while the UN Group of Ex perts report rejected that any ties exist in Congo between rebels called ADF and ISIS, but also to ‘evaluate the park rangers of the Virunga and Garamba national parks’, *Note aux médias, Ambassade des États-Unis* Kinshasa, 13 August 2021.


77. I put Anthropocene in quotation marks, since the use of ‘Anthropos’ (as a universal category) conceals the difference within this ‘human ity’, both in terms of responsibility as in regard to victimhood.


79. *Anima* = breath, soul, to give life (Webster).


81. Ibid.

82. The title points towards the necessity of understanding the anthropocene from the perspective of Congo. See: De Groof, ‘CONGOCENE…”

83. Anselm Franke, *Animism* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), p. 120.