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„I don't want to be Foottit's [(or) Foot-it] stooge anymore. I want to be taken seriously". *Chocolat* (2016)

Postmigration and French Biopic Film¹

Abstract: The French biopic film, a genre that has become very popular in recent years, offers the opportunity to (re)discover the biographies of symbolic figures in history and to continuously present the history of France through the prism of the myth of a "great nation". Since *La Môme* in 2007 and its overwhelming success, series of productions around France's great personalities from culture, arts and politics have followed one another. From Molière to De Gaulle and Mesrine to Gainsbourg, the biopic in France has remained very national and nationalistic overall. The emergence of the Double Wave directors had an influence not only on French cinema in general, but also on the biopic itself. This paper will use *Chocolat* (2016) by Roschdy Zem to outline the critical approach of post-migrant film works towards the French biopic and, in the same context, their positioning towards a more regular (post-)colonial collective memory in France.

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¹ This article is the outcome of a lecture on French biopics at the 35th FF-Kolloquium. The initial interest was in the films *Vénus noire* and *Chocolat* by Abdellatif Kechiche and Roschdy Zem respectively. While the presentation at the congress relied extensively on *Vénus noire*, the focus of this article is on *Chocolat*. This bias is mainly due to the guidelines and requirements of the editors of this issue. Trans. by myself B. N. from the original French: "Je ne veux plus être le faire-valoir de Foottit. Je veux qu'on me prenne au sérieux."

1. On Postmigrant Cinema?

“I believe that every broken biography, be it through migration or other circumstances, holds a certain potential”, is how Shermin Langhoff formulates one of the main postulates of the post-migrant theatre in Berlin-Kreuzberg “Ballhaus Naunynstraße”, which brought the term post-migration to a broader public.² Langhoff’s post-migrant theatre pursued the goal of turning theatre into a think tank that feeds on outcast voices, creative spaces or “lines of flight”³ that promise innovation. Erol Yildiz and Marc Hill summarise this initiative under the term „Transtopien“ and thus refer to urban or conceptual spaces „in denen scheinbar entfernte, lokale wie grenzüberschreitende Elemente miteinander verknüpft werden und sich zu urbanen Strukturen und Kommunikationsformen verdichten. Transtopien sind Orte des Übergangs, an denen marginalisierte Akteure und Wissensarten ins Zentrum der Betrachtung rücken, privilegiert, zum Teil auch kultiviert werden“.⁴

In this respect, the term postmigration distances itself from a chronological understanding of “post”. Postmigration here does not refer to the period after migration, because migration has established itself as an ongoing phenomenon, marking considerably the history and current affairs of our time, thus positioning itself no longer as a mere object, but as a meaningful perspective reading of the globe in general and of Europe in particular. It can therefore be argued that migration or mobility is at the core of global history. In this sense, the term postmigration does not always bring into focus the imaginations, memories, careers and works of those who are themselves emigrants or have a family migration background, both personal and collective, but rather “argues for the common space of diversity beyond origin”.⁵ Yildiz elaborates on this almost programmatic and paradigmatic objective when he ascribes to postmigration a critically embedded but also empowered attitude of mind or an obstinate, insightful practice of knowledge production.⁶ This consists of carrying out critical reflections, questioning social power relations, taking a stand against any forms of discrimination from the perspectives of class, gender, or even race. Postmigration would then defend an epistemic turn in the context of a world or society strongly shaped by migration, in which the colonial or hegemonic abyssal line is abolished, in which the marginalised are dereified for example, in which society should be thought of from their perspective and beyond. Thus, the dereifying process hints at a promising idea: The

² Schmidt/Thiemann 2022: 12.

³ Deleuze/Guattari 1980: II.

⁴ Yildiz 2014: 32. Trans. by myself B. N.: „in which seemingly distant, local as well as cross border elements are linked and condense into urban structures and forms of communication. Transtopias are places of transition in which marginalised actors and ways of knowing are placed at the centre of attention, privileged, and are in part also nurtured“.

⁵ Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung 2011.

⁶ Vgl. Yildiz 2014: 33–34.

interweaving of subversive critique and the creative potential of postmigration. It is very obvious that the perspective of postmigration, which is both critiquing domination and rich in creativity, is expressed in artistic forms of imagination using film as an example.

We can assume here that the debates on postmigration always try to run beyond the scope of the term nation. The idea of the nation from an exclusionary, conservative, uniform and homogenising point of view is critically rejected in this framework. A restrictive approach to the nation, and thus to neighbouring or derived concepts, using the example of national identities, is primarily disavowed herein. Along these lines, many scholars read postcolonial approaches such as hybridity as a productive ground to engage with a concept of identity in the context of postmigration.⁷ From a cultural-philosophical perspective, others approach cultural diversity from Deleuze/Guattari's rhizome metaphor, so as to explore on this occasion "die subversive Kraft der globalen Pluralisierungsprozesse"⁸ and thus to develop the thesis of transdifference in the context of multi-perspectival "concepts of culture and identity". In the film landscape itself, Deniz Göktürk notes in the early 2000s that "migrants are slowly [breaking free] from the prison of a subnational culture of pity"⁹ and rather devote themselves to "transnational alliances".¹⁰ Ege foregrounds the fact that it is primarily second-generation immigrants in Europe who are being discussed in cinematic productions.¹¹ Examples include films by directors in Germany, the UK or France who come from a "double vague", according to Claire Diao.¹² "[D]ouble vague" refers here to filmmakers who come from and therefore draw their imagination from at least two cultural spheres, one could mention Abdellatif Kechiche or Roschdy Zem in France, Ama Asante or Mira Nair in the UK, and Fatih Akin or Mo Asumang in Germany. These are further transnational or transcultural attempts to go emphasize on concrete bases the concept of postmigration in the cinematic context.

However, reversing this transcultural or transnational perspective on postmigration in the cinematic context could allow for "lines of flight" (Frz. *lignes de fuite*)¹³ to be explored. One of these would be to focus on the nation concept rather than beyond the "nation". There would be a question of getting to the bottom of the term nation critically, for example, to reveal its incompleteness, to renegotiate the nation culturally and hermeneutically. These processes of negotiation take place through the imagination (as the creative cornerstone) articulated among others in artistic works. These are seen as interventions by their creators in the post-migrant context

⁷ Vgl. Ömer/Geuer 2022.

⁸ Ege 2018: 164. Trans. by myself B.N.: "the subversive power of global pluralisation processes".

⁹ Göktürk 2000: 329–347.

¹⁰ Ebd.

¹¹ Vgl. Ege 2018: 163.

¹² Diao 2017.

¹³ Deleuze/Guattari 1980: II.

or, even further, by post-migrant filmmakers (but not only) within a cultural field marked by relations of tension and power. Films then emerge as interventions both within a cultural field or a national cinema as well as within and towards a nation. Films can then be understood as grasping words within a specific national cinema and thus referring to a specific nation. In this way, they would then claim to make a cultural hermeneutic contribution to the national “missing people” from an inclusive perspective. On the one hand, this would clarify the extent to which the term postmigration could have a critical as well as an affirmative potential. On the other hand, the merit of such an attempt would be to bring into focus the longstanding problematic of the relationship between film and nation.¹⁴

Genre research can prove promising in this respect. It is now considered little deniable that this categorical film-critical film research has played an important part in processes of marginalisation and even *ghettoisation* of filmmakers and their works. Some works on genres such as *cinéma beur*, black british cinema, asian british cinema, migrant cinema and immigrant film can be quoted as examples.¹⁵ The common denominator of these genres is that they describe works created by directors from or with a migration background. However, works by artists with similar, comparable biographies or acquired symbolic capitals can be taken into account from a different, positive point of view. Some films made by the so-called *double vague* in France can meet this promise with regard to both the French biopic and the French national historiography. Using the biopic as a genre case study, they can suggest discourse-critical as well as discourse-affirmative content, which can thus be executed as a kind of double consciousness, following W. E. B. Du Bois.¹⁶ Indeed, it would be about a cinematic double consciousness related to the genre and to national historiography and therefore national community.

From its history, the biopic emerges as a genre whose acceptance has not formed a unified consensus among general as well as professional critics. Neale describes the Hollywood biopic as an unpopular, mocked genre whose potential is not even explored enough in critical, analytical research.¹⁷ In the French context, this difficulty in finding solid ground under one's feet even begins with the naming. Until 2007, the term “biopic” was written in inverted commas. Before that, it was rather “biographie”, “biographie filmée” or even “film biographique”.¹⁸ The biopic as the new preferred name in France may be mainly due to the great success of the film *La Môme* (2007) by Olivier Dahan.¹⁹ In addition to this term, the mixture of fiction and reality in this genre often does not always go down well with the audience, for the means of fiction can lead to a distortion, deformation or dramatisation of the

¹⁴ Vgl. Kaes quoted from Wende 2002: 9. About the relationship between film and nation: Kracauer 1947, Haward 1993, Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning 2008.

¹⁵ Vgl. Göktürk 2000, Seeßlen 2000: 22–29.

¹⁶ Vgl. Du Bois 1997 [1903]: 38.

¹⁷ Vgl. Neale 2000: 60.

¹⁸ Moine 2010: 270.

¹⁹ Ebd.

biographies to be portrayed for market reasons and sales purposes.²⁰ According to Cheshire, the resentment this triggers among the audience is in a way the reason why this genre is sometimes considered frowned upon.²¹ Beyond this kind of slander, it can also be discussed that this fulfils ideological functions. They can take on a considerable share in the (critical) formation of a collective memory and thus in the historical or historical-national formation of a people. This takes place through the aesthetic engagement with the history of a country, a community, a phenomenon or through the biography of a person or a personality. The genre can contribute to the popularisation of biographies,²² of a certain entertainment culture – just like in the period after the Second World War²³ – or be involved in the deconstruction of “myths of the nation”.²⁴

Raphaëlle Moine talks about the different variations of a French biopic. She builds her research, for example, on the diachronic approach of Caroline Vernisse to the biopic in France, whose credit it is, among other things, to bring to light the new development of this genre in France from the 1990s onwards. However, Moine works on a complementary historical reconstruction of the French biopic, assigning four main phases of development to this genre in France. In the article *Le biopic à la française: de l'ombre à la lumière* (2010) Raphaëlle Moine explores the genesis, developmental phases and specific characteristics of the French biopic. One of the insights that can be gained from this contribution is that until the turn of the 1980s, French biopic films were exclusively devoted to great (mostly male) figures, especially from science and political power, as well as the Roman Catholic Church – as in *La passion de Jean d'Arc* (1927) by Carl Dreyer – from a strictly nationalist perspective.²⁵ The films featured the works, the achievements of these figures, thus highlighting their contribution to a great French “nation”. Examples include *Monsieur Vincent* (1947) by Maurice Cloche, Henri Diamant-Berger's *Monsieur Fabre* (1951) or *Pasteur* (1935) by Sacha Guitry. Moine characterises such films as „récits hagiographiques à la gloire des hommes célèbres “. ²⁶ From the 1980s onwards, the spectrum of the biopic expanded considerably. The genre's target interest became more fragmentary; it then also oriented itself towards emblematic personalities of popular culture, the forgotten of history and then contemporary prominent artists. Figures from the entertainment world, as in *Gainsbourg* (2020) by Joan Sfar, *Dalida* (2017) by Lisa Azuelos, or criminals, as in *Mesrine: L'instinct de mort* (2008) by Jean-François Richet, have been increasingly brought to light,²⁷ whereas some previously highly celebrated artists were de-mythologised. This is the case, for example, in *Le*

²⁰ Vgl. Cheshire 2015: 3.

²¹ Ebd.

²² Vgl. Letort/Tuhkunen 2016.

²³ Vgl. Fontanel 2016.

²⁴ Custen 1992: 6–8, Hayward 1993, Njanjo 2022.

²⁵ Moine 2010: 271.

²⁶ Ebd.: 272. Trans. by myself B. N.: “hagiographic narratives to the glory of famous men”.

²⁷ Madelénat 2001: 97.

Libertin (1997) by Gabriel Aghion, *Le Défi* (2007) by Daniel Vigne and *Molière ou le comédien malgré lui* (2007) by Laurent Tirard. Nowadays, the biographies of figures from the world of fashion and luxury are also brought to the screen, as in Jan Kounen's *Coco Chanel & Igor Stravinsky* (2008), *Coco avant Chanel* (2009) by Anne Fontaine and *Yves Saint Laurent* (2014) by Jalil Lespert.

A postcolonial overall view of the works of this genre in France reveals, on the one hand, a strong nationalist imprint on the genre, with mainly male figures at the centre. In this way, the Republic is limited to great, white men. And the state's financial support for the production of such films testifies to its involvement in the construction, dissemination and upholding of discourses of power in the culture of the imagination within the country. Despite a late expansion of the canon to include women, on the other hand, the discourse was limited only to continental France, maintaining, for example, the DOM-TOMs (French Overseas Departments and Territories) as a symbolic legacy of a once colonial nation in the ghettos. Indeed, it seems as if there are no other figures who are part of the French cultural wealth, or as if the French Republic is only to be celebrated, which in this sense would mean a fading out of France's atrocities in the time of slavery or colonialism. The biopic thus becomes a cinematographic genre that is closely linked to cultural processes of exclusion and colonial amnesia.

Astrid Erll calls the strategic actualisation of a work of fiction as a medium of memory "Rhetorik des kollektiven Gedächtnisses".²⁸ She identifies five modes, each of which has a different impact on the study of this rhetoric: the experiential mode, the monumental mode, the historicising mode, the antagonistic mode and the reflexive mode. An enquiry into the selection and perspectival structure of a film and its language design will help to clarify the reflexive mode of the French biopic *Chocolat* (2016) by Roschdy Zem, on which this paper mainly focusses, as a rhetoric of collective memory and thus as a medium against colonial amnesia.

In the reflexive mode, social forms and modes of operations involved in the production of collective memory become the object of the portrayed perception. In this respect, Astrid Erll, for example, attributes a prominent role to references to discourses, media, institutions and practices of memory culture. In *Chocolat*, some institutions and figures of French circus and memory culture stand out, namely the co-founder of the Moulin Rouge Joseph Oller, Georges Footit and Rafael Padilla (with Kananga as nickname) named "Chocolat".

"Chocolat", whose real name is Rafael Padilla, was the first black stage performer in France. With Footit, the duo made clown comedy, in this case slap comedy, even more popular in France. While Footit plays the authoritarian white man, "Chocolat" plays the role of a black whipping boy. The famous French poet Jean Cocteau wrote about this: „Ce qui était beau, c'était le cirque; alors il y avait Footit et Chocolat; Footit qui était comme une duchesse folle et Chocolat, le nègre qui recevait des

²⁸ Erll 2007: 390.

clagues.”²⁹ It is precisely the story of the latter that Roschdy Zem intends to retrace with Omar Sy in the role of Chocolat in his biographical opus, largely inspired by the book *Chocolat, clown nègre* (2012) by the French historian Gerard Noiriel. What should be noted here is that this comedy of slaps and black sufferer role reflects a certain colonial-racist iconography, which one would have found in the role of Monostatos in *Zauberflöte* (1791), around the same time. This problematises the role of art in general and the circus in particular in the education of the masses, the formation of the taste of the bourgeois class, and therefore of a certain collective habitus in a particular phase of French cultural history. Thus, this biopic puts the issue of race in art back on the agenda: its importance in a certain construction of taste in Bourdieu’s sense³⁰, of a collective identity at a precise moment in the cultural history of Europe. By the same token, this uncovering of the place of art (circus) in the circulation of colonial-racist stereotypes points to a deconstructivist willingness of the same art (this time cinema) to participate in reflexive ways in the formation of a critical collective colonial memory of colonialism in France.

2. About Race and the Articulation of Power Relations

First of all, I will focus on the first show (00:34:35 – 00:37:32) of Foottit and Monsieur “Chocolat” in Paris (three-quarters of the film is focused on “Chocolat”’s trajectory in Paris.). It is actually the only scene of their entire career in Paris that is fully represented in the film. To some extent, it sets the scene. It is quite suitable for reflecting on the power relations between Foottit and “Chocolat” on the one hand, and between the two of them and the audience on the other. I will also take a closer look at a few cinematographic features such as the *mise-en-scène*, the settings and the lighting. Foottit and “Chocolat” are at the centre, according to the spatial configuration of a circus. Around them, we have the spectators who, unlike in cinema, are actively involved in the spectacle. Regarding the lighting, the scene begins in darkness. Only Foottit and “Chocolat” are visible at the beginning, and this is through a moving spotlight technique, which keeps the audience in “a” certain invisibility. The different camera angles in this scene are mostly the close-ups and the semi-close-ups, which actually draw attention to the two actors and their facial features, movements and physical language. The spectators are rarely and separately shot here. They sometimes appear in the background of the camera, which once again gives the impression that the audience seems to be excluded from the centre of the scene.

²⁹ Stéphane 1989: 40. Trans. into English by myself B. N. “What was beautiful was the circus; then there were Foottit and Chocolat; Foottit who was like a crazy duchess and Chocolat, the negro who was slapped around.”

³⁰ Vgl. Bourdieu 1979.

Let's first look at the relationship between Foottit and "Chocolat" on stage. Although it is a play or a comedy, it is meaningful and instructive: Foottit is the leader, takes on the role of the master and Monsieur "Chocolat" that of the servant. This can be deduced, among other things, from the clothing styles. "Chocolat" lets himself be kicked in the backside. He is subjected to harassment and slaps in the face without anyone being bothered by it. They all laugh out about it, the bourgeois audience foremost. On stage, "Chocolat" is the one who resists, disobeys his master Foottit, thereby causing him inconvenience and trouble. He plays the not very sociable guy. Foottit has a hard time controlling "Chocolat", identifying "Chocolat" in the darkness, and even distinguishing him from the dark. The scene exemplifies a binary configuration of the plot: Foottit the "white" on one side and Monsieur "Chocolat" the "negro" on the other. Two concepts, "white" and "negro", each with a historical development. They are embodied by Foottit and "Chocolat" and are reflected here on stage. Monsieur "Chocolat" seems from the outset to be only a body, the prototype of a "negro": he is tall, gigantic and fantastic, very dark-skinned. He consists, as Mbembe would emphasise, of flesh, muscles and an extraordinary accumulation of sensations: He laughs, shouts or behaves childishly constantly.³¹ "Chocolat", as the only dark-skinned one in this circus, embodies a particular humanity in the eyes of his counterpart; a humanity with a wild appearance and weird looks; a humanity that laughs or roars endlessly; a humanity that is always about to play, to be silly; a humanity that has remained at the latency stage of childhood. This humanity seems/seemed to embody difference in its crudest expression (somatic, affective, aesthetic, etc.) in the 19th/20th century Western European imagination. This humanity seems to exhibit the caricature of the principle of exteriority and exclusion because of its multiple, ontological deviations.³² It can therefore hardly be imagined as part of "our white" culture. On these grounds, this humanity needs to be tamed, trained and civilised. To argue with McClintock, humanity must be domesticated.³³ Foottit's torture and harassment of "Chocolat" on stage would therefore be legitimised. The word domesticate is etymologically derived from dominus, lord of domun (here home). Its primary meaning converges with the term dominate or civilise. Foottit here is the lord of the domun – the circus – and may be in a literal analysis of his name the Foot-it-er, the buttock kicker. "Chocolat" is the object to be domesticated. The circus itself is the play, the symbolic space or ritual, whereby "Chocolat" as the prototypical image of the savage, the "negro" is domesticated into a hierarchical sub-position in relation to his "white" counterpart. Although we are confronted here with an art form, with a configuration of stage play, the fact remains that this one seems to be strongly penetrated by the cultural history of the period. The stage seems to reflect in a less critical way (compared for instance with aesthetic of Kechiche in *Black venus*, 2010), which is the whole point of this biopic aesthetic work, which is fed by the tropes and images of

³¹ Mbembe 2017: 39.

³² Ebd.

³³ Vgl. McClintock 1992: 35.

the time of models and patterns of representation of the self and the other. This configuration of the stage also highlights how society, in this case its bourgeois classes, uncritically consumed these models of representation, constructed their collective habitus and, in turn, their own collective identity. Furthermore, this articulation of the scene seems to highlight, through the aesthetisation of Footitt's biography, the centrality of racism in this society, which not even Rafael Padilla's artistic talent could resist.

The articulation of racism from a critically embedded perspective can also be analysed from the perspective of the relationship of the two actors to the audience. In this respect, I would like to focus on the role of the audience, which is in a kind of active invisibility. The audience, as mentioned earlier, falls into invisibility to the extent that it is not directly involved in the show. But it remains active nonetheless, insofar as it has an evaluative function in the circus. The spectators evaluate the actors and the content of the games. What is offered to them consists of what they like, is in accordance with their expectations and imaginations. From a purely reception-aesthetic perspective, it could be argued that the artistic work is only realised in its reception by the receiving entities.³⁴ A piece of artwork only becomes one once it has been received. Based on this, the audience in the circus possesses a symbolic power through which the shows fulfil themselves. They become instances that allow the show to unfold as an artistic work. To do so, these shows would have to match the expectations and representations of the audience. In this sense, the audience figure becomes an instance of power that has privileges in its possession. The more this pattern goes on, the more crowded the circus is, the more the audience attends. By virtue of this principle, the audience's participation in a circus show can no longer be considered passive. Now let us make the following assumptions: The shows of Footitt and "Chocolat" present hierarchical images of a master and his servant on the basis of race; that "Chocolat" as a "negro" is domesticated to a hierarchical sub-position in relation to his "white" counterpart on stage; that the show presents us with a kind of evolution of humanity in the sense of Darwin (from the childish "negro" to be assimilated to the animal to the modern, enlightened and civilising "white"). Assuming this would lead us to perceive these shows as "panoptical time",³⁵ consumed at a glance by the audience from an active and privileged position of power. Indeed, every single performance in Paris offers the audience this opportunity to assimilate global history without critically engaging with it.³⁶

This tension between the two clowns and the audience can also be analysed through the prism of another of Anne McClintock's terms, "anachronistic space".³⁷ This refers to the spatial representation of a time period that articulates the archaic, the

³⁴ Jauß 1994.

³⁵ Vgl. McClintock 1992: 35.

³⁶ Ebd.

³⁷ Ebd.: 40.

exotic in relation to modern times. In other words, anachronistic space is an artificially structured space that makes it possible to travel or look into an imagined past or into earlier imagined evolutionary phases of humanity. Such a journey is offered to the circus audience in the film, and the circus stage stands as the space of this anachronistic spatial configuration. “Chocolat” represents not only childhood or the latency of humanity, but also for the “modern, enlightened European” subject an irrational, prehistoric and atavistic time that would undoubtedly relate to the African continent. For, according to some modern thinkers such as Kant, Levy-Bruhl or Hegel, Africa is an anachronistic moment compared to Europe, for example.³⁸ “Africa” in modernity stands for at least two things: on the one hand, for the problematic, precarious and empty existence of man, on the other hand, for this indissoluble relationship between man, animal and nature, between life, illness and death, between joy and terror, between childhood and adulthood. Hegel writes about this as follows:

Jenes eigentliche Afrika ist, soweit die Geschichte zurückgeht, für den Zusammenhang mit der übrigen Welt verschlossen geblieben; es ist das in sich gedrungene Goldland, das Kinderland, das jenseits des Tages der selbstbewußten Geschichte in die schwarze Farbe der Nacht gehüllt ist. Seine Verschlossenheit liegt nicht nur in seiner tropischen Natur, sondern wesentlich in seiner geographischen Beschaffenheit [...]. Bei den ‚N****‘ ist nämlich das Charakteristische gerade, daß ihr Bewußtsein noch nicht zur Anschauung irgendeiner festen Objektivität gekommen ist.³⁹

3. On race and Capital

I am now interested in discussing the relationship between race and capital. It is about the role of the category of race within an economic power structure, within the further development of economic capital. According to some scholars,⁴⁰ race has been and is still the driving force of capitalism. If colonialism was driven, among other things, by the search for outlets or raw materials for the then flourishing European industry, we may say that this ideology was not made conceivable unless it first assumed the inferiorisation and objectification, or even the dehumanisation of an imagined “other”. So, in this section, I would like to draw up the basic thesis that the category of race has served the economic capital in France in the 20th century. I will illustrate this with the example of further scene extracts from the film. I will give more importance to the spoken language in the film (sentences, expressions, words, etc.) for this purpose. This is because Foucault emphasises that language should be considered metaphorically as a sun.⁴¹ Language is not only to be

³⁸ Levy-Bruhl 1963, Kant 1777, Hegel 1928.

³⁹ Hegel 1928: 135, 145.

⁴⁰ Robinson 2000 [1983], Mbembe 2017.

⁴¹ Vgl. Foucault 2004 [1963]: 165.

accounted from the prism of form, of mere utterance. Rather, it is to be seen as a system of life. He adds "The sun of language is hidden within the secret; but at the heart of this night where it is maintained, it is marvellously fecund, causing machines and automaton corpses, incredible inventions and careful imitations [...] language speaks only from something essential that is lacking".⁴² There is then a complex but productive relationship between language and life. In his poststructuralist bias, Deleuze recognises one of the greatest powers of language in its ability to "state the sense of what I say, to say at the same time something and its meaning".⁴³ Consequently, any work on a system of life should presuppose work on its language. This positive assemblage between the two entities (language and life) in relation to the colonial context becomes even clearer in Fanon's opus *Towards The African Revolution*. According to him, an analysis of a subject or system articulation in the context of colonisation should necessarily begin with a critical engagement with language.⁴⁴

At the outset, we can already mention a few irrefutable facts: Foottit's career as a clown is in free fall, the Delveaux (white French couple promoting a young circus company in a french countryside) are in search of a new breath and Rafael Padilla is looking for a career path as a clown. Out of sheer coincidence, the Foottit-Kananga duo becomes successful. The duo arouses desire and curiosity among the public and peu à peu becomes a real artistic label, which immediately leads to an increase of entries at the Delveaux. The same is true of the *Nouveau Cirque* in Paris, whose income drops drastically when *Chocolat* is imprisoned for a week. The Delveaux even go bankrupt when Foottit and Kananga withdraw from their contract. It would be as if *Chocolat* were always at the core of this financial disposition. "*Chocolat*" because that is his artist's name; "*Chocolat*" because the public likes this cartoon image, and so do his bosses; "*Chocolat*" because his bosses can make themselves a lot of money from this label, and even more than "*Chocolat*" itself. It would not be uninteresting to think about what is associated with this label of "*Chocolat*". More about this is revealed during a discussion between Kananga, Foottit, the boss of *Nouveau Cirque* in Paris and a businessman with whom the three sign a new contract. The discussion suddenly turns to strange features of a poster that will announce future shows by Foottit and "*Chocolat*". When Kananga complains that his image on the poster does not resemble him, that he looks like an animal in the picture for performance shows, the businessman replies as follows: "Les gens y sont très attachés [...] Ce sont des stéréotypes actuels, l'image que les gens se font des gens comme vous."⁴⁵ And he adds: "Si je peux pas utiliser votre image ou votre

⁴² Ebd. 166–167.

⁴³ Deleuze 1990: 29.

⁴⁴ Vgl. Fanon 1967: 33.

⁴⁵ Trans. by myself B. N.: "People have great affection for this image, for this representation. [...] These are current stereotypes. This is how people imagine people of colour."

popularité, je vois pas très bien l'intérêt de vous avoir, surtout à ce prix-là."⁴⁶ In such circumstances, "Chocolat" with regard to Mbembe becomes a "man-merchandise, man-of-money".⁴⁷ He exists solely by producing a capital, by reinforcing and reproducing power structures. Vis-à-vis his white counterpart Rafael Padilla does not exist, his patron at the *Nouveau Cirque* even does not know his real birth name. They all seem only interested in the character "Chocolat" and not in Rafael Padilla. Rafael Padilla is then reduced to "Chocolat" because of his *race*, and thus, according to McClintock, to a commodity, a commodity consumed in mass-produced spectacles. The consideration he receives from his bosses echoes Mbembe's description of slaves, regarded as the lifeblood of a global capitalist system: "Slaves were considered as mere merchandise, objects of luxury or utility to be bought and sold to others."⁴⁸ This also confirms Fanon's ideas that the "black" is a "figure" invented by the "whites", an "object" created by the white sight, whereby this "object" has been elaborated from details, anecdotes, fantasies and stories.⁴⁹ This actually means that Rafael Padilla has no intrinsic identity. He comes to existence exclusively through "Chocolat", through his bestiality and his animality, through his potency to reproduce the savage, the "other", the foreign. He exists only when he can generate capital, only when he can/will dehumanise himself in favour of the white counterpart. The only humanity assigned to him is actually a capitalist non-humanity. His humanity, in the capitalist context, ultimately consists in a dehumanising process. Moreover, the inequalities created by this process are such that "Chocolat", as a dehumanised object, only benefits from the crumbs of this economic capital itself. When Foottit demands a raise for his partner and him, the Delveaux are only willing to raise his wages, but not Kananga's under any circumstances. In Paris, Foottit earns twice as much as his direct partner "Chocolat" on every single contract, on every advertisement, even though Foottit gets excluded from the posters sometimes. In this way, the racial centrality of an objectified, bestialised chocolate at the heart of a capitalist, colonialist system is articulated.

4. Conclusion

The biopic as a genre may not always be a straightforward reproduction of a biography. It does allow for some deviations from it, but also for a deeper exploration of certain features of the biography. This can sometimes be due to the intentionality of the director or to the power relations in place in the field. Returning to the film *Chocolat*, Rafael Padilla will not accept Foottit's slaps and humiliations on stage indefinitely. During a serious discussion with the director of the Paris circus,

⁴⁶ Trans. by myself B. N.: "If I cannot use your image or your popularity, I don't see much point in having you, especially at that price."

⁴⁷ Mbembe 2017: 47.

⁴⁸ Ebd.

⁴⁹ Vgl. Fanon 1967: 91.

he said: "I don't want to be Footit's [(or) Foot-it] stooge anymore. I want to be taken seriously." This is the beginning of his emancipation, as he finally decides to be the master of himself and his destiny against all odds, which will lead him to the theatre. This change of attitude and trajectory as well empowers those of the marginalised and allies who identify with "Chocolat" or see themselves in solidarity with him. This film is no longer just about keeping quiet about the violence suffered by a person of colour, but about creating sources of hope, attempts at radical change. This approach and visceral sensitivity of Roschdy Zem is not only a tribute to his multicultural cultural attachment such as Kafka, who in his time as a marginalized one in German-ruled Czech Bohemia spoke of four impossibilities; these impossibilities not only explained his embarrassment as a Jewish writer in that context to either embrace Zionism, for example, or to be entirely oriented towards German culture, but also constituted the driving force of his interculturality and the diversity of his writing: "To the impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing in German, the impossibility of writing differently, one could almost add a fourth impossibility, the impossibility of being able to write".⁵⁰ Drawing an analogy to Kafka, it can be argued that Zem's double consciousness, stance towards the biopic genre and the national collective memory would be driven by a conscious awkwardness between these four impossibilities: the impossibility of not filming, the impossibility of shooting the biopic as the general practice in the field, the impossibility of shooting differently due to the constraints of the field, but also, and above all, the impossibility of not shooting this biopic. This embarrassment would therefore be the creative matrix of his intercultural, post-migratory aesthetic, which leads to the desire to transform the biopic in France, but also to encourage reflection, the deconstruction of the French "nation" and the birth of that "missing people", which Deleuze so earnestly calls for.⁵¹

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⁵⁰ Kafka 1966: 337 f.

⁵¹ Deleuze 1989 [1985]: 217.

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