Return to the Postcolony
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Estos dos ensayos de T.J Demos, extraídos del libro *Return to the Postcolony. Specters of Colonialism in Contemporary Art*, exploran la fotografía y el cine de los artistas contemporáneos, como Sven Augustijnen, Vincent Meesesen o Pieter Hugo, que han viajado al África poscolonial en los últimos años y han inspirado una especie de *migración inversa*, que acciona un conjunto ético-político así como una estética imperativa basada en aprender a convivir con los fantasmas del pasado colonial.
Return to the Postcolony

Introduction
Enter: The Ghosts

Let those to whom history has not been friendly bear witness to the process by which the living transform the dead into partners in struggle.

—Black Audio Film Collective, Handsworth Songs (1986)

This book explores the photography and film of contemporary artists who have voyaged or returned to postcolonial Africa in recent years. With a focus on the work of Sven Augustijnen, Vincent Meessen, Zarina Bhimji, Renzo Martens, and Pieter Hugo, it considers how they have investigated the specters of past colonial injustices. Those injustices are often repressed in European consciousness and visual culture, yet still frequently and stubbornly emerge in its discourse and representation. The often unrecognized and generally inadequately interrogated historical presence, material traces, and psychic scars of colonialism, passed through generations, also creep up in current forms of economic and political inequalities found between the Global North and South, Europe and Africa—inequalities that colonial relations, of course, played an important role in defining. These traces can be found in the contemporary media images of seemingly senseless violence and poverty in the postcolony, and in the disavowed complicity and unprofessed responsibility of European nations that once ruled those distant lands in the name of political, economic, and social advantage. Given the fact that there is no firm separation from, or clear European conscience in relation to, the colonial past, in many ways, that colonial era never actually ended.

Against the amnesia and misrecognition that characterizes so much of European cultural and political representation, the artists addressed herein might be thought of as conjurers of the "spectral"—to invoke the title of Augustijnen’s film Spectres (2011)—a term I use to address the haunting memories and ghostly presences that refuse to rest in peace and cannot be situated firmly within representation. Indeed, they typically escape the grasp of the art history of iconographical identification as much as the positivist typologies of scientific knowledge. In using this occult language, my aim is not to embrace a post-secular and antimaterialist metaphysics, but rather to think along with theorists such as Isabelle Stengers, Bruno Latour, and Avery Gordon, sharing their skepticism regarding the self-assured and firm separation between modern science and premodern animism, between objective positivism and subjective belief, between the real and the imaginary. The resulting analysis takes an even more materialist line insofar as it is attentive to the historical and current circumstances and socio-material conditions of colonial and postcolonial narratives that pose challenges to positivist representational forms. Indeed, it was in a provocative moment of
dialectical materialism sensitive to this enchanted netherworld that Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels described how a certain “spectre” once haunted Europe. Moreover, such methodological recourse is demanded not simply because of recent developments within philosophical circles—for instance, the recent formation of “speculative realism,” which, building on Latour’s position, attempts to move, on the one hand, beyond the stale oppositions of the postmodern era between a reality-denying constructivism and a naive objectivist realism¹, and, on the other hand, toward a different set of documentary possibilities that bring affect, imagination, and truth into a new experimental configuration. And it’s not simply because this discourse has been taken up recently within artistic circles—for instance, Anselm Franke’s ongoing research/exhibition project “Animism,” and Okwui Enwezor’s postcolonial-engaged documenta 11 (2002), among others—with which my own investigation shares a similar set of interests (exhibitions that extend earlier artistic invocations and critical conjurings of postcolonial enchantments and possessions in experimental cinema—for example, Black Audio Film Collective’s and Isaac Julien’s work made in the 1980s and 1990s)². Taking up the language of the ghostly is justified mainly because the photography and film works that form my central case studies enact a complex turn toward the spectral, innovatively and diversely figuring and building upon what Jacques Derrida has usefully called a “spectropoetics.”³. They focus our attention on the aesthetic aspects of the problem, whereby beings and presences enter uneasily into, or insistently disturb, representation and the stability of its visual, temporal, and spatial logic. It is for these multiple reasons that I take seriously these ghostly matters in contemporary art.

If these artists investigate the poetics of the spectral, then they do so in quite diverse and singular ways, invoking the equally diverse and singular histories and geographies of colonialism. The approaches, for instance, include Augustijnen’s Spectres, in which the Belgian artist investigates the still-extant regime of justification of one collaborator for the crimes of his country’s colonial past in the Congo, which leads to the witnessing of an apologist discourse that ultimately condemns itself. Conversely, Brussels-based artist Meessen’s Vita Nova (2009) opens up the ghost world surrounding the early critic of French colonialism, Roland Barthes, in order to reveal simultaneously the impossibility of any definitive and truthful account of history, and the ongoing need for a historical reckoning, in part by shedding light on the aftermath of France’s colonial interventions in West Africa. Meanwhile, London-based artist Bhimji’s Yellow Patch (2011) crafts a cinema of affect in order to explore an emotional sensitivity to the history, cultural geography, and ghostly presences of twentieth-century Indian migrants who once called Uganda their home and were later

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brutally exiled during the country’s early years of independence (in Bhimji’s case, ending up in Britain). Employing a still different artistic approach, Dutch artist Martens traveled to the Democratic Republic of the Congo for his video work *Episode III (Enjoy Poverty)* (2009) to create a performative intervention in the image regime of media, photojournalistic, and artistic representations of poverty, ultimately exhibiting the structural conditions of economic inequality under neoliberal globalization. And finally, for his various photographic series over the last decade, South African artist Hugo journeyed across sub-Saharan Africa to visualize the complex aspects of postcolonial social reality, offering a mix of performative artifice, allegories of horror and dysfunction, and testimonies of creative existence.

In this regard, *Return to the Postcolony* takes account of a convergence in contemporary art of the last few years whereby numerous practitioners in Europe (and in the case of Hugo, South Africa) have begun to explore the complex legacy of colonization, doing so at the moment of the fiftieth anniversary of independence for many African countries. (In the 1960s more than thirty countries gained their independence from nations including Britain, France, Belgium, and Spain.) The artists considered here are of a generation born during the 1960s and early 1970s, and are thus considering the colonial history of their parents’ and grandparents’ generations. There is also a shared impulse in critically investigating the conditions of neocolonialism that in recent years have thwarted economic development and democratization in equatorial Africa, as in many areas of the Global South, and which connects directly with the European political crisis around migration. This impulse has inspired a kind of “reverse migration” for European artists: to return to the postcolony to seek answers to urgent questions regarding the causes and histories behind the desire of multitudes to travel northward, and to account for the transgenerational haunting for the injustices of the past that continues to inform the present.

By invoking the term “postcolony”—identifying societies that have emerged from the experience of colonization—I remain aware of its chaotically pluralistic qualities, which prevents any single or general definition. As theorized by Achille Mbembe, the African postcolony nevertheless possesses an internal coherence, particularly in terms of the distinctive regime of violence of dictatorial and failed states alike. Mbembe describes that regime as expressive of a “necropolitics”—that is, a mode of governance and economy of death that merges a Foucauldian biopolitics with the Agambenian notion of bare life and the state of exception (visions of which appear variously in my case studies). Yet while the postcolony maintains its own mythologies and fetishes of state and militia power, which Mbembe treats at length, one finds no such unmediated representation of such a reality within the works of the artists considered here—rather each offers a particular approach to the postcolony that is itself typically determined to greater or lesser degrees by European narratives, historical accounts, and symptomatic disavowals (in the films of, for instance, Augustijnen, Meessen, and Bhimji), as well as by the often clichéd mass media representations of central Africa (in the work of Martens and Hugo). As a result, the postcolonial condition emerges as one of “temporal entanglement,” which encloses “multiple durées made up of discontinuities, reversals,

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inertias, and swings,” including European narratives and representations and African experiences and histories that intertwine and (in)determine each other\(^5\). Still, in terms of my approach, there is no attempt to suggest a unified picture of postcolonial reality; instead, each artistic project offers its own entrance into distinctive and immensely complex histories and places.

That said, there is an additional internal coherence to the economic conditions of the postcolony that many of the projects considered here touch on, insofar as those conditions have come to define neoliberal Africa. As political theorist Graham Harrison observes, “It is fair to say that from the early 1980s, Africa was subjected to a pervasive and concerted project of economic liberalisation: a project that was aggressively advocated, funded and monitored by the World Bank and the IMF.” As he explains, “structural adjustment”—a macroeconomic program that privatized industry, opened up states to deregulated free trade, and consequently defunded them—has led to the crumbling of social systems, insecurity, and lack of education and health care funding that we’re familiar with today, becoming “in effect, the development orthodoxy for the continent.”\(^6\) It is here that we get to one fundamental spectro-ontology—or birthplace of ghosts—of the postcolony. My running hypothesis is that the colonial past still haunts us because it is a past that has not really past. When Mbembe points out how “postcolonial state forms have inherited [...] the regime of impunity” of “colonial sovereignty,”\(^7\) and when Harrison observes that “neoliberalism is one more project in a programme of Western imposition that commenced with colonisation,”\(^8\) it becomes clear that the postcolony is not strictly post, but is in fact in many ways neo. Indeed, one might say that it has been neo ever since Ghanaian leader Kwame Nkruma coined the term in 1965 with his book _Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism_—if for different reasons in the neoliberal present than during the beginnings of so-called independence\(^9\). Still, the basic idea is the same: neo signifies the continuation of colonial rule by other means, by political and economic control rather than military occupation\(^10\). It is in this context that we now live, even if it is frequently denied and disavowed by those that typically benefit from such arrangements, and who make the claim that we recognize a New World Order of liberal democracy, freedom, and economic inequality—inviting us to forget the war, suffering, and social dysfunction on which global neoliberalism thrives. Against the veil of mystification that represented the initial years of economic globalization in the 1990s, Derrida claimed, “It must be cried out, at a time when some have the audacity to neo-evangelize in the name of the ideal of a liberal democracy that has finally realized itself as the ideal of human history: never have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, and thus economic oppression affected as many human beings in the history of the earth and of humanity.”\(^11\) One motivating factor behind Derrida’s


\(^6\) Harrison goes on to point out that “the core policies within SAPs [Structural Adjustment Programs] were: the removal of exchange rate controls and consequent likely devaluation, the reduction of money supply and relatedly reduced public expenditures, increased rates of interest, the removal of price controls and public marketing institutions, and some kind of plan to open the economy more fully to FDI [Foreign Direct Investment] and relatedly privatisation.” Graham Harrison, _Neoliberal Africa: The Impact of Global Social Engineering_ (London: Zed Books, 2010), 39.

\(^7\) Mbembe, _On the Postcolony_, 26.

\(^8\) Harrison, _Neoliberal Africa_, 22.


\(^11\) Derrida, _Specters of Marx_, 85.
imperative is that if we don’t cry out, then we face a continual haunting by the catastrophe of the colonial present, which is in fact what we’ve witnessed ever since.12

It is precisely the negations, disavowals, and rejections of historical responsibility and present advantage, occurring in political discourse as much as in cultural representations, that allow and even cause the ghosts to fly free. This recognition of negation as a causality of haunting raises a problem in relation to aesthetics given its definition as a mode and medium of appearance. For how can we account for an aesthetics of the negation of appearance, or the appearance of negation, that determines the spectropoetics found in the works of the artists addressed in the following pages? For Derrida, the challenge is one of developing an appropriate “hauntology”—the study of the haunting of being, and of the being of haunting, which he carried out in reference to Shakespearean literary texts and Marx’s writings13. Owing to the West’s failure to address the suffering and misfortune that are the products of the global capitalism and liberal democracy it triumphantly celebrates, the West has remained haunted by the history of communism and its promise of equality and social justice, even as it thought that that history was definitively concluded with the fall of the Soviet Union14. Again, the problem is not one of dealing with spirits from another world; rather, it’s a matter of being sensitive to modernity’s phantoms—that is, the disturbances and lingering presences, or presences of absence in the orders of visual appearance, through which current social formations manifest the symptomatic traces and uncanny signs of modernity’s history of violence and exclusions. For Gordon, “the ghost is a crucible for political mediation and historical memory,” one that calls for “an alternative diagnostics” linking “the politics of accounting, in all its intricate political-economic, institutional, and affective dimensions, to a potent imagination of what has been done and what is to be done otherwise.”15

It is such an “alternative diagnostics” that I also want to deploy in reading the innovative aesthetic terms of these artistic practices concerned with ghostly matters of the colonial past and present. In taking up the colonial histories and experiences, narratives and stories, they challenge the kind of “knowing” neoliberalism desires, and by challenging its epistemology of forgetfulness, they propose ways of enacting politics differently, as well as aligning art with the struggle against forgetting. The advantage being that by reckoning with these phantom presences, the artworks allow us to overcome the dangers of paranoia and depression, as well as surmounting traditional forms of critique that, in claiming access to a greater truth, often only ended in another level of mystification. Whereas Gordon’s analysis takes up Freudian psychoanalysis—from the uncanny to

12 Of course, the relation between past and present is not a simple matter, and Mbembe indicates elsewhere the necessity of addressing the aftermath of colonialism: “As far as Africa is concerned, colonialism is over. Apartheid is over too. Africans are now the free masters of their own destiny. This is why from an intellectual and political point of view, there is no turning away from the difficult work of freedom.” Quoted in Christian Höller, “Africa in Motion: An Interview with the Post-Colonialism Theoretician Achille Mbembe,” Springerin 3, no. 2 (June 2002), n.p. Also see Derek Gregory, The Colonial Present (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).
13 Derrida, Specters of Marx, 10.
14 This revival of Marxism has been present in numerous exhibition projects in recent years. I explore some of them in my essay, “Is Another World Possible? The Politics of Utopia in Recent Exhibition Practice,” in On Horizons: A Critical Reader in Contemporary Art, eds. Maria Hlavajova, Simon Sheikh, and Jill Winder (Utrecht: BAK, 2011).
15 Gordon, Ghostly Matters, 18.
the death drive—my own approach investigates ghostly matters in relation to the photographic and filmic aesthetics that investigate colonial narratives, the materiality of haunted geographical sites, and the possessions of social figures. It takes seriously the filmic intimations and portents, negations and disavowals of historical and contemporary figures. My modus operandi is to provide close analyses of the works at hand and to think with and believe in them, to be sensitive to their aesthetic interventions and metamorphic transformations, as well as point out their critical limitations when appropriate.

Organized over five interconnected chapters, Return to the Postcolony presents a series of case studies that contextualizes the select artist’s work within a broader set of artistic developments in Europe and Africa, including contemporary art’s relation to the aesthetics and politics of a variously reinvented documentary practice, critical and creative historiography, and postcolonial globalization. It is not surprising that the documentary mode emerges here as a crucial form in relation to the will-to-history in the context of enforced amnesia. Nor is it unexpected that documentary practice would find itself significantly challenged by what Derrida terms the “apparition of the inapparent” and the conjuring of “the untimely,” which spectropoetics comprises. How such an aesthetics of the ghostly emerges in contemporary art, and exactly what it means for the reinvention of documentary practice, will be addressed in relation to the singularity of individual artworks—while simultaneously exploring the commonalities between these artists’ projects in working toward breaking the spell of the colonial haunting and the political ambition that that shared commitment implies. The first chapter focuses on Augustijnen’s film Spectres, which deals with the haunting of one Jacques Brassinne de la Buissière. A young diplomat at the time of the “Congo Crisis” in 1960–61, when the first elected prime minister of the country, Patrice Lumumba, was arrested, tortured, and assassinated, Brassinne has as of late turned into an obsessive archivist of the past he lived through. The film develops a complex and critical accounting of his discourse, opening up the trauma of Belgium’s past, including the violent history of King Leopold II’s nineteenth-century conquest of the Congo. It reveals the still-professed official narratives that whitewash the history of the country’s involvement and carefully control its colonial archive. My analysis aims to bring out the importance of the film’s investigation of the perpetrator’s narrative, by which it resists continuing traditional documentary’s longstanding and expected concern with the suffering of victims, and asking where such a focus leaves the viewer.

The second chapter examines Meessen’s filmic archaeology of the iconic image of a young African boy saluting the French flag that appeared on the cover of a 1955 issue of Paris Match. Roland Barthes famously analyzed the photo in his 1957 book Mythologies, wherein the French critic decoded the colonialist message of native devotion to the French Empire. Meessen recently visited Burkina Faso in search of the photograph’s subject and found an old man whose memory of his country’s colonial days was spotted with gaps, including—as shown in the film’s opening

On learning to think with animism, see Isabelle Stengers, “Reclaiming Animism,” e-flux journal, no. 36 (July 2012): 8. “Reclaiming animism does not mean, then, that we have ever been animist”; only becoming sensitive to the “assemblages that generate metamorphic transformation in our capacity to affect and be affected—and also to feel, think, and imagine.”
scene—his recollection of many of the words to the French national anthem, which was once dutifully sung by the colonized. As it turns out, Barthes had himself “forgotten” to mention the history of his own family’s relation to colonialism— and particularly that of his grandfather, Captain Louis Gustave Binger, who “gave” Ivory Coast to France—opening onto a critical and moving account of the specters that haunted Barthes, one of France’s most enlightened cultural critics. That history has yet to be fully acknowledged today in cultural, historical, and political discourse in a France that has largely refused to engage its colonial legacy. As well, the film movingly explores the aftermath of the colonial project in contemporary central Africa, where new generations of Africans now salute their own national flags (but in whose interest is a question infrequently asked).

My third chapter considers Bhimji’s recent film, for which the London-based artist returned to Gujarat, India, the point of origin for many Indians who left for East Africa during the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century expansion of the British Empire. Her film investigates the historical intersection of colonialism and migration, and builds on her earlier films such as *Out of Blue* (2002), which traces the remnants of violence and present repression, and conversely the sources of tenderness and beauty, in postcolonial Uganda. That country remains the primal scene of trauma for thousands of Ugandan Asians who were violently expelled by the military dictator Idi Amin during the early years of his reign in 1972, when he attempted to “Africanize” his country by expelling all “foreigners,” including some who had lived in the country and whose families had called Uganda home for several generations. Bhimji discovers the ruins of that expansive and transnational geography and fraught history in her allegorical imagery of sights and sounds of present-day Uganda, India, and Zanzibar, which elicits the terror of the colonial past and, paradoxically, the irrepressible desire of a homecoming. Distinct from the film essays of Augustijnen and Meessen, Bhimji’s film includes almost no verbal language. Her work conjures the spirits of the past in order to create a new cinematic poetics of affect beyond the linguistic dimension.

The fourth chapter examines Martens’s controversial film *Episode III (Enjoy Poverty)* (2009), which documents his intervention in the mediatized representations of the dire economic conditions of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Proposing something of a Swiftian satire realized in the artist’s performance, Martens suggests that the country’s greatest “natural resource” is its poverty, for which it receives hundreds of millions of dollars in annual aid from international donors such as the World Bank. Investigating the implications of that scandalous proposal, Martens’s film represents a critical exploration of the image industry of photojournalists, critical artists, documentarians, and humanitarians alike, which reveals the paradox of documentary practice based in well-intentioned compassion that risks contributing to, and economically benefiting from, the perpetuation of social crises. It also shows how present economic arrangements that drive African poverty are a carry-over from colonial dominance. As such, globalization remains haunted by the undead existence of Europe’s imperial past17. In this case, exorcizing the ghosts of this past means discovering our own complicit position within the image regimes that mediate and even generate the reproduction of inequality.

The fifth chapter considers Hugo’s documentary photography, for which he visited several sites in Africa, including the infamous Agbogbloshie market in Accra, Ghana, the center of a notorious e-waste dump that “recycles” disused European computer technology. The reality behind such environmentalism is the production of a toxic atmosphere ruinous to West Africa’s social and natural ecology. Hugo’s imagery of young foragers in these techno-wastelands represents the current-day reversal of years of colonial resource exploitation of African lands: now the obsolete products of Europe are returned to complete the cycle of destruction—both of lives and of environments. In this regard, European viewers are confronted with the specters of their own participation in the socio-environmental destruction of Africa, even as those specters of death and destruction are returned to them in the monsters of Nollywood horror, as captured in another of Hugo’s photographic series, which transcribes the experiential deformities and economic alienations into a visual economy of white-eyed zombies and bloodsucking vampires. His imagery of “capitalist sorcery,” one of possession and exploitation, offers a glimpse of the imaginary of contemporary neoliberalism. Yet here horror also translates into a creative rewriting of the space of everyday life, and defines an imaginative form of survival and a posthuman futurity amid the crises that otherwise plague the postcolony.

If such a hauntological study necessarily proceeds by rejecting—along with Stengers, Latour, and Gordon—the clear separations between modern science and premodern animism, objective positivism and subjective belief, the real and the imaginary, then it corresponds, in my view, to an innovative approach to aesthetics that joins the factual and the fictional. It is in this sense that I remain sensitive to the novel approaches to the documentary mode here, in that the films and photographs of Augustijnen, Meessen, Bhimji, Martens, and Hugo reject the strict definition of the documentary as a matter of presenting facts in an objective fashion—as in current news media footage, legalistic and military surveillance, and forensic modes of representation—wherein we witness the survival of earlier paradigms of documentary authority, whether ethnographic, scientific, or criminological. My analysis is attentive to the apparitions, the ghostly memories, the spectral figures, and the untimely presences that trouble and disturb those very declamations of historical truth and disavowals of the colonial present that make these artists attuned to what Meessen has termed a “colonial hauntology.” As such, it is entirely appropriate that this investigation is conducted in the medium of the moving image, the privileged modern site—along with photography—where we witness “the great Frankensteinian dream of the nineteenth century” wherein the dead appear to return to life. As Franke points out in his own engagement with this line of inquiry in relation to contemporary art: “The Frankensteinian dream does not undo

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20 Meessen organized a film screening and discussion series under the title “Hantologie des colonies” from October 8 to November 18, 2011, in coordination with Espace Khiasma in Paris.
the subject–object dichotomy; rather, it qualifies it. It is the symptom of a bourgeois hegemonic perspective that has internalized the logic of the divide”—between animism and objectivism, between a porous relation between subjects and objects and its rigid separation in modern science—“and turns the tension, the antagonism between *rigor mortis* and phantasmagoric animation into an aesthetic economy endlessly reiterated.”

Still, that is not to say that these artworks surrender their purchase on capturing the significance of historical experience and even exposing and contesting the fabrications and lies of neocolonialist revisionism. These commitments have led to the original approaches to what might be variously termed documentary fiction, the film fable, the cinema of affect, the film essay, and the performative documentary. Confronting this blurring of fact and fiction, document and storytelling, it is the language of the literary, speculative, and aesthetic that becomes particularly apt in terms of defining a methodology where truth is not abandoned, but is instead found in the contingencies, conflicts, and shadows of historical discourse, media imagery, and social reality. These films and photographs thus investigate, probe, and analyze what has been done, and in doing so, they provide numerous suggestions—if not ideologically programmatic or politically activist—for what is to be done otherwise. To start, what can be done otherwise is to acknowledge the ghosts, to open up the repressed histories, to admit the colonial present, and to commence this politics of memory in partnership with the dead in struggle. As Derrida observed almost twenty years ago, this is a time of the “learning to live,” “to learn to live with ghosts. [...] To learn to live otherwise [...] more justly.” We are still grappling with that lesson. Enter the ghosts...

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22 Franke, “Much Trouble in the Transportation of Souls,” 34. Franke draws on Latour’s *We Have Never Been Modern* and discusses cinema, among other matters of contemporary art, as opening a liminal transit zone between objective and subjective, mechanical and phantasmic worlds.


24 In other words, truth survives as a “matter of concern,” to invoke Latour once again, as well as constitutes a “politics of truth” in the Foucauldian sense. See Michel Foucault, “Subjectivity and Truth,” in *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. Lysa Hochroth and Catherine Porter (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007), 152–53.

25 Derrida, exordium to *Specters of Marx*, xviii.
A Colonial Hauntology:
Vincent Meessen’s
Vita Nova

In Vita Nova, a thirty-minute video from 2009, Vincent Meessen takes up the iconic 1955 cover image of the French magazine Paris Match, which features a close-up of a young African cadet giving a military salute. The image is the same one that Roland Barthes referred to in his book Mythologies as an example of visual culture that defines an ideological operation in support of French colonialism: “I see very well what it signifies to me,” wrote Barthes, “that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors.” While he went on to criticize that logic, Barthes investigated the image no further. Meessen did. After performing research on the image and its historical context, in 2006 he embarked on a search for Diouf Birane, the one-time African cadet named in the Paris Match issue, hoping to track down the subject of the photograph who would now be an old man possibly living in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, his country of origin listed in the magazine. The resulting video records moments of that journey and its unexpected discoveries, weaving together a provocative meditation on the philosophy of history, its repressed narratives, and the spectral nature of photography.

Thanks to Meessen’s efforts, Vita Nova gives “new life” to that image. Just as the camera slowly pans out from an initial close-up shot of the boy’s eyes—as if asking insistently what did he see in 1955 and experience thereafter?—the film makes the magazine cover, which is visually revealed in full only gradually over several passages throughout the video, into a platform for an investigation into wider and interlinking histories that have come to light only recently. The filmmaker did not find Birane, who died in Senegal in the 1980s, but his old schoolmate Issa Kaboré, who appeared in other photographs in the same issue of Paris Match. The magazine publicized Les Nuits de l’Armée, the televised 1955 military pageant featuring a spectacle of more than four thousand participants, including the Garde Noire de Dakar, the French Foreign Legion, the Paris Fire Brigade, and the Republican Guard, all appearing at the Palais des Sports in Paris to celebrate France’s colonial empire. It was for this event that Birane and Kaboré had come to Paris. The film opens with shots of a recording session to which Meessen invited Kaboré to sing the French national anthem. Once a common ritual of France’s extended national community—it would have been sung that day in Paris in 1955—Kaboré no longer fully remembers its words. (He recalls the opening, “Allons enfants,” but strikingly has forgotten the various parts of the revolutionary anthem that condemn “blood tyranny,” “vile despots,” and the battle cry for the victory of liberty.) The pain that

27 The caption for the cover image reads: “Les Nuits de l’Armée: Le petit Diouf venu de Ouagadougou avec son camarades, enfants de troupes d’A.O.F. [Afrique Occidentale Française], pour ouvrir le fantastique spectacle que l’Armée française presente au Palais des Sports cette semaine.” (The Nights of the Army: Little Diouf came from Ouagadougou with his comrades, children of the troops of French West Africa, to open the fantastic spectacle presented by the French Army this week at the Sports Palace.)
this experience elicits for Kaboré is palpable. If, as Barthes argued in *Mythologies*, the *Paris Match* image represents the perfect rejoinder to the critics of France’s colonial empire, then the memory of such acts of native patriotism is shown to be on the verge of oblivion following the intervening years of decolonization and independence.

Vincent Meessen, still from *Vita Nova*, 2009

Vincent Meessen, still from *Vita Nova*, 2009
Yet, as the film goes on to observe, Barthes’s celebrated analysis of the image was not quite as complete as it might now seem. In fact, his critical performance had its own moments of forgetting, or at least selective remembrance. For, as Meessen discovered in his research—in an astonishing historical revelation that has hitherto gone unremarked in the scholarship—Barthes’s own maternal grandfather was none other than Louis Gustave Binger, the French explorer and colonial officer who claimed Ivory Coast for France in the 1880s, served for a time as the colony’s governor, and lent his name to Bingerville, the city that remains named in his honor to this day. We learn about that history in a scene where Kaboré is shown sitting in a reconstructed classroom in a former military academy in Ouagadougou and is presented with the story of Binger’s life in Africa by an unseen narrator. Born in Strasbourg in 1856, Binger traveled to West Africa in 1887, when he visited Niger and the coast of Guinea, making his way from Bamako to Kong in 1888. He created friends and enemies with Africans along the way. (As related in the video, the Dyerma, who “couldn’t stand the sight of his white skin,” wanted to kill Binger, which he explained to a chief in Tiakényé, who offered him protection and hospitality before he left for Ghana and Ivory Coast.) He died in 1936 in the French town of L’Isle Adam.

Vincent Meessen, still from *Vita Nova*, 2009

The sequence displays documentary photographs to visually supplement the lesson, including a shot of a copy of *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* open to the pages with photographs of the author’s grandfathers (but with the most generic of identifications: “Les deux grand-pères”).
It leads to a pair of hands flipping through a photo album, coming across old photos of marching troops, Africans in military uniforms, and a final black-and-white photo of two white colonists—identified as “Capitain Louis Gustve [sic] Binger and Lieutenant Braulot”—clad in white uniforms, sitting under a tent at a camp in the jungle, and attended by two shirtless Africans. The film thereby opens the colonial visual archive, but does so from a position attentive to the African perspective. In one image depicting Binger’s funeral, the young Barthes appears looming in the corner looking on, offering visual evidence of the genealogical relation, and thus of his own familial connection to the colonial context. It is striking that Barthes declined to discuss his relationship to his grandfather in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, his later autobiographical account. By opening up that history, the film offers a tale of forgetting—yet a forgetting that is itself diversified according to disparate contexts: Kaboré’s perhaps welcomed transcendence of the colonial past appears quite different from Barthes’s implicit disavowal of his family’s involvement in it. This tale of colonizer and colonized becomes the basis of Meessen’s historical reanimation—in particular, one that conjures equally the ghost of Barthes and the histories that may have haunted him.

For this reason, *Vita Nova* can be said to constitute a colonial hauntology, insofar as it conjures the ghosts that have hovered around this *Paris Match* image—a key exemplar of late colonial visual culture—which links diverse peoples, geographies, and political histories via France’s
colonial past. The term proposes a methodology of interpretation that attempts to uncover both the ontology of a haunting (the being, effects, and affects of possession) and the haunting of being (the way presence is shadowed by unacknowledged histories and suppressed relationships that disturb the present’s complete severance from the past). For Derrida, writing after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, calling up the world of ghosts meant to contest the claim that the post-socialist world had entered a triumphalist period of globalization, one of the universal rule of free market capitalism, as if it had put all other economic models safely to rest.

Countering such amnesiac and partially blind glorifications of the present, and responding to the conflicts and failures of modernity that continue to inspire alternative politics of equality, inclusivity, and justice, the spirit of communism remains, for Derrida, irrepressible, even if it is not simply or easily available in the present. “Let us call it a hauntology,” Derrida writes, designating “the virtual space of spectrality” that operates in the otherwise “sharp distinction between the real and the unreal, the actual and the inactual, the living and the non-living, being and non-being.”\textsuperscript{28} The

\textsuperscript{28} Derrida, \textit{Specters of Marx}, 10–11.
question is how Meessen wields this hauntology today\textsuperscript{29}. What are its singular aesthetic conditions, the particular “spectropoetics” of \textit{Vita Nova}, and what does the video’s conjuring of ghosts have to teach us?

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Hauntology is in fact a longstanding concern in Meessen’s work, for which the artist has undertaken numerous visits to postcolonial places, exploring the ruins of modernity and the aftermath of colonial-era utopias. His projects frequently enact performative scenarios, where visitations to distant lands bring about the sudden collapse of geographical and temporal separations, giving way to fraught and uncanny proximities. In 2005, for instance, Meessen created \textit{The Intruder}, a video and public intervention set in Ouagadougou for which he dressed up in a bizarre outfit of white cotton, covering his figure from top to bottom, and silently walked the streets unannounced. Captured by a camera that recorded his stroll, \textit{le blanc}—as he was called—became a source of fascination and anxiety, as well as a site of spectral doubling, as Meessen’s hands remained uncovered and thus the figure presented a specter of white skin under a white mask (ambiguously inverting Franz Fanon’s famous book title)\textsuperscript{30}. The performance created a screen for spontaneous responses by locals as the drama suggested an imagined precolonial encounter with racial difference set in postcolonial Burkina Faso. However, this interpretation was never expressed by any bystander over the course of the video’s seven-and-a-half minutes—rather, the public teased the figure by calling him Santa Claus and Osama bin Laden. The performance bore no clear meaning, and without voice-over or narrative framework, the figure appeared haunting as a result of its very lack of clear significance or obvious allusion.

\textsuperscript{29} The term was also mobilized by Meessen’s organization, Normal, which organized a series of contemporary and historical films and discussions under the title “Hantologie des colonies,” between October 8 and November 18, 2011, in coordination with Khiasma in Paris. Meessen, along with Pablo Martínez, also organized the related symposium, “A Bewitched System: The Exorcising Role of Images,” at CA2M Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo, Madrid, June 18–20, 2012.

\textsuperscript{30} For a discussion of the “spectral dizziness” of the whiteness of the anthropologist, with which Meessen’s figure resonates, see Pinney, \textit{Photography and Anthropology}; 59; and Michael Taussig, \textit{What Color Is the Sacred}? (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 81–82.
Another visitation occurs in *Dear Adviser* (2009), a short video documenting a man wearing a business suit who walks amid a semi-urban landscape of dirt mounds and roads and modernist concrete buildings, which appear mysteriously as both unfinished and in ruins. In fact, the work is set in Chandigarh, the city planned by Le Corbusier in the 1950s as a shining example of Nehruvian modernization in newly independent India and marking the shared capital of the Punjab and Haryana states. Haunted by the ghosts of modernity, as much as by the architectural phantasm of centralized political power transplanted from the West to the Indian subcontinent, the images trace the figure walking among shadows. At the same time, the voice-over relates a favorite fable of Le Corbusier’s—who wished to be addressed as “adviser,” even as he functioned as a kind of legislator during the project—about a crow wanting to imitate an eagle (playing on the French, where *corbeau*, crow, mirrors “Corbu”). Intimating a tale of postcolonial mimicry—for how could Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru turn to the architecture of international modernism to represent the new Indian state in the first place, was it not a continuation of the cultural logic of Western hegemony?—the scene appears to be affected by its metaphysical disturbances today. “The capital shall be haunted [...] the living shall call, the dead shall call,” the voice-over intones repeatedly.
In both *Dear Adviser* and *The Intruder*, Meessen models his own version of performative documentary in which the recording of an action performed in situ delivers unscripted results. As such, the two works depart from conventional documentary approaches in that they don’t record events that are subsequently given narrative explanation; rather, they produce new events by showing how the past subsists as an irrepressible force in the present, which is always in the process of becoming. The performances featured therein are characteristically left open to interpretation, even as they sometimes appear overlaid with poetic voice-overs alluding to the world of ghosts and hauntings. The result, as with Sven Augustijnen’s work, fractures the now into past and present and proposes unsuspected correspondences between otherwise discrete temporalities (though Meessen’s dramatic personae, appearing as if visitors from elsewhere, depart from Augustijnen’s talking heads, lodged in everyday life).

*Vita Nova* continues this hauntological structuring, deepening the essayistic component of *Dear Adviser* and intensifying the historical insight of *The Intruder*, even as the video develops further the performative aspect of both. The video is also organized around the spectral figure of Etienne Minoungou, a Burkinabé actor and theater director who plays the role of narrator and is occasionally seen in the film visiting select locations in Ouagadougou, such as the governor’s
mansion where Binger once resided. For his script, Meessen draws largely from Barthes’s own writings—interweaving excerpts from *Mythologies*, *Camera Lucida*, and *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*—yet in doing so the narration performs a significant shift in temporal, geographical, and subjective registers. Not only does Barthes’s voice appear to speak disjunctively in the present tense, as if he were talking to us today, it also finds itself spatially estranged in its relocation in an African context and embodiment in the enunciative particularities of another man’s speech. The result crystallizes the meanings of Barthes’s texts, throwing them in unexpected directions whereby they generate new narrative lines of flight. In effect, by relocating Barthes’s speech in an African’s voice, *Vita Nova* grants language to the formerly colonized, animating beings that then come to haunt Barthes’s words from within.

As the film makes clear, such a détournement is mandated by Barthes’s own aesthetico-political analysis presented in *Mythologies*, especially where the author explains that myth is a form of “stolen language,” one diverted from its original intended meaning. In fact, Barthes goes so far as to liken myth to “robbery by colonization.” If so, what would it mean to steal back Barthes’s text, to mythologize *Mythologies* in turn? Would it constitute a belated decolonization of sorts? As the narrator of *Vita Nova* explains, “Words will never die because they aren’t beings but functions. They only undergo changes, avatars, reincarnations.” If “words undergo reincarnations” then “what would happen if Roland Barthes’s words would reincarnate?” Meessen’s narrator asks. This reanimation is exactly what *Vita Nova* performs, and the results bring about new critical insights—despite the fact that the appropriation of myth is no guarantee of criticality. On the one hand, it entails showing how the magisterial act of semiological decoding performed in *Mythologies* was also simultaneously a gesture of veiling—hiding Barthes’s own familial investment and complicity in the very colonial project he critically analyzed so brilliantly. On the other hand, it grants the author a new life, albeit one that remains as ghostly as the specters that haunt Barthes’s own texts (such as his grandfather), insofar as Meessen opts to position historical facts within new narratives of speculative fabulation.

Of course Barthes himself—whom Jean-Michel Rabaté terms “the ghostwriter of modernity”—wrote frequently about death. For him, death was “the eidos”—or most distinguished expression—of photography, and he likened his own experience of being photographed to that of

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33 Ibid., 132.
34 Indeed, Sven Lütticken points out, “Some appropriations may end up reinforcing myths. Second-degree mythology may indeed become a pseudo-critical, impotent pretension, still dominated by the myths it claims to debunk. It can also become its own myth: the myth of appropriation as intrinsically radical, or productive of radical difference.” “The Feathers of the Eagle,” *New Left Review* 36 (November–December 2005): 124–25. In this essay, he provides a useful genealogy of modern art and myth, including discussion of Marcel Broodthaers’ Barthes-influenced strategies of appropriation, which will be relevant, as we shall see, to Meessen’s project.
35 The notion of “speculative narration”—a form of construction that resists probability in order to create a new world was discussed by filmmaker Fabrizio Terranova at the conference organized by Meessen on February 7, 2012, at Netwerk, Center for Contemporary Art, Aalst, Belgium, on the occasion of his exhibition there.
becoming a “specter.” As Eduardo Cadava writes: “There can be no photograph without the withdrawal of what is photographed. [...] The conjunction of death and the photographed is in fact the very principle of photographic certitude: the photograph is a cemetery. A small funerary monument, the photograph is a grave for the living dead. It tells their history—a history of ghosts and shadows—and it does so because it is this history.” In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes’s later meditation on photography, he also performed a spectralization of sorts by displacing the *stadium* (the symbolic meaning of an image) from his analysis in order to focus on what he terms the *punctum* (the subjective “prick” that resists signification, the shadowy detail that escapes and thereby haunts the image’s conventional coding). For instance, consider his discussion of Félix Nadar’s 1882 photograph of Pierre Paul François Camille Savorgnan de Brazza. In the image, the famous explorer who claimed western Congo for France is shown seated against a naturalistic backdrop of a seascape and is accompanied by two young black boys dressed up as sailors, one with his hand resting on de Brazza’s thigh in a gesture of peculiar intimacy. “This inconspicuous gesture is bound to arrest my gaze, to constitute a *punctum*,” Barthes confessed, even as he determinedly ignored the image’s obvious ideological construction of colonial paternalism. “And yet it is not one,” he continued, “for I immediately code the posture, whether I want to or not, as ‘aberrant’ (for me, the *punctum* is the other boy’s crossed arms). What I can name cannot really prick me. The incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance.”


Yet one wonders why he can’t name this disturbing gesture (of crossed arms), one of seeming subtle subversion, offering an opaque hint of self-possession that appears to reject the drama of colonial relations in which he’s apparently made to take part. Surely the Barthes of _Mythologies_ would have seized on the opportunity to identify this construction. Is it because “the _punctum_ is what haunts,” as Avery Gordon suggests, but cannot be openly discussed? For her, “it is the detail, the little but heavily freighted thing that sparks the moment of arresting animation, that enlivens the world of ghosts.” In this case, is the spectralization a matter of the bizarre transference that places Barthes’s father in the role of de Brazza, and splinters Barthes’s own subjective positioning into the double parts of the two boys, one faithful to colonial paternalism, the other a distanced critic of it? Yet if the _punctum_ enlivens the world of ghosts, then it can also cover up, shroud, and conceal insofar as it punctuates “the incapacity to name.” Whereas Barthes was

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Gordon, _Ghostly Matters_, 106–8. She writes further: “The enchanting detail cannot be predicted in advance or calculated for methodological rigor. It is without doubt, and despite Barthes’s desire to create a science of it, a highly particularized, if also fully social, phenomenon.”
concerned in *Mythologies* with the decoding of the ideological message, and therefore with the as-yet-unnamed *studium*, then Meessen responds in *Vita Nova* by identifying and opening up the *punctum* of that *Paris Match* image, making it into a grave for the living dead—in this case, the subjective but unspoken meaning that that colonial image may have held for Barthes. In other words, the film explores Barthes’s personal and familial connections to the colonization of West Africa that likely informed his relation and interest in that image, connections that were then suppressed by “the incapacity to name.”

Of course others have taken Barthes to task for his photographic aesthetics as well. For theorist Ariella Azoulay, Barthes’s position— as presented in *Camera Lucida*—constitutes a renunciation of what she sees as the ethicopolitical responsibility to what is represented. In effect, Barthes “reduce[s] the role of the spectator to the act of judgment, eliminating his or her responsibility for what is seen in the photograph. That judgment assumes a passive attitude toward the image and is primarily interested in questioning the extent to which the photograph succeeds in arousing a desired effect or experience.”

What were the circumstances of Barthes’s transformation from the 1950s to the 1980s, one that ended with the embrace of this very act of subjective judgment? Was it a matter of increasing age and the shifting of subjective and political preferences? (As critics have observed, with the passing of the 1970s, Barthes turned increasingly to the exploration of textual pleasures that amounted to a withdrawal from political engagement toward subjectivist aesthetics.) Or was it rather determined by the shifting historical context—for France in the 1950s was in the midst of intense conflicts over the politics and militancy of anticolonial struggles, particularly in Indochina and Algeria. For instance, it was this context that led Jean-Paul Sartre to publish “Le colonialisme est un système” in the review *Les Temps Modernes* in April 1956—at exactly the same time when Barthes was writing the short texts of *Mythologies*—in which he claimed: “We, the People of Mainland France, have only one lesson to draw from these facts: Colonialism is in a process of destroying itself. But it still fouls the atmosphere. It is our shame; it mocks our laws or caricatures them. It infects us with its racism. [...] It obliges our young men to fight despite themselves and die for Nazi principles that we fought against ten years ago; it attempts to defend itself by arousing fascism even here in France. Our role is to help it to die. Not only in Algeria but wherever it exists.”

In relating colonialism to Nazism, Sartre was invoking the leading voices of radical black opposition to France’s and Europe’s colonial politics, including those of W. E. B. Du Bois, C. L. R. James, George

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Padmore, and Aimé Césaire. Undoubtedly this anticolonial politics within France was what was behind the defense of the colonial project mounted by Paris Match in the mid-1950s, even while French West Africa had long been the site of anticolonial resistance, particularly following World War II, and continued as such intermittently until Ivory Coast received self-government status in the late 1950s and full independence in 1960. By 1980, when Camera Lucida was published, the colonial question was clearly no longer present in the same way, and it was in parallel with that historical development that Barthes turned to other non-colonial matters.

If Barthes’s transformation entailed a spectralization of sorts—a rendering ghostly of the historical and political meanings and significances of the colonial past, which were excavated in Mythologies—then this became the source of further reanimations and conjuring tricks in Meessen’s exhibition project, “My Last Life,” at Khiasma in Paris in 2011, and at Netwerk in Aalst, Belgium, in 2011/12. “My Last Life” extended the thematic and structural engagements in Vita Nova. The series of installations and visual presentations further investigated the hauntings of Barthes, whom Meessen transformed into a spirit that hovered around the exhibition’s objects and displays, their fictional constructions revealing their own historically meaningful truths. Decorated with potted palm trees, the display called up the spirit of Barthes’s mother, Henriette Binger, whose Winter Garden Photograph the author famously contemplated without reproducing it in Camera Lucida. As well, the palm-tree installation also conjured Belgian conceptual artist Marcel Broodthaers and his archival model of the “museum fiction,” the presentations of which were similarly decorated in order to reproduce the genteel but nature-dominating institutional environment resonating with colonial Belgium. Meessen’s exhibition is a similarly poetic and historically generative model of institutional critique, but here it expands the focus to the artist’s construction of a surprising imaginary archive of Barthes. The assembly drew together documents and inventive constructions that turn fiction into the building blocks of a newly revealed historical reality of the cultural and visual institutions of the colonial past. Within the display, the visitor encountered various magazines such as Paris Match, National Geographic, La Quinzaine, and travelogues from the colonial period—including one hardcover, Le serment de l’explorateur, authored by Louis Gustave Binger. These were dispersed on the floor along the edges of the gallery. Custom-crafted wooden vitrines, which exhibited the documents in the earlier Paris installation, lay empty and legless on the ground at Netwerk—a shift in display suggesting the possibilities of narrative reconfiguration from one engagement to the next and thus the impossibility of a single definitive history. In objectifying these documents and transforming them into sculptural forms, the installation emphasized their plasticity in relation to historical accounts, which themselves seem endlessly mutable.

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45 As Barthes explained, “I cannot reproduce the Winter Garden Photograph. It exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of the thousand manifestations of the ‘ordinary.’” Camera Lucida, 73.
The exhibition thereby threw its inclusions—discursive markers of various historical trajectories—into new constellations, partly indicated in the expansiveness of the large “cosmograph” on one wall: a complex linear interlinking of diverse names connecting people, characters, works, and historical periods, including Binger, Barthes, *Paris Match*, Stéphane Mallarmé, Alfred Stieglitz, and Philip Sollers. The map’s hundreds of references (produced using an open-source computer program for genealogy construction) far exceeded the exhibition’s main content in scope, and opened up seemingly infinite potential narrative plots. A pile of reprinted issues of *Paris Match* appeared in the opposite corner, reedited to highlight all the material from the July 1955 issue related to colonial endeavors, which now seems so clichéd in its portrayal of Africa. It included a short photo-essay documenting the visit of Diouf and his comrades Issa and Santoura (referred to familiarly by the magazine editors) to the Eiffel Tower in Paris and *La fête à Neu-Neu* in Neuilly-sur-Seine in the week before *Les Nuits de l’Armée*; a report on King Baudouin’s visit to the Congo; an article on the alleged existence of slavery in Mali; an illustrated essay on the “last survivors of prehistory” found in New Guinea; and a four-page small-scale reproduction of all the pages of the original magazine.
These romantic and exotic narratives of colonial exploration surprisingly parallel Barthes’s own fictional wanderings as imagined in and by the exhibition. For instance, Meessen presented mock-ups of three unrealized books by Herbé—a French homophonic equivalent of the initials “R. B.,” as Barthes sometimes referred to himself in print. The titles, based on Barthes’s own whimsical indications of possible subjects found in his writings, offer a speculative glimpse of the author’s dream to be a novelist. These include: *Psychanalyse istorique des imageries tronquées* (Historical Psychoanalysis of Truncated Images), *Theatrum Orbis Verborum* (The World Theater of Words), and *Mathesis Singularis* (Singular Science), the last one based on Barthes’s provocative suggestion in *Camera Lucida* that each text or image deserves its own singular interpretive methodology. It is such a methodology that *Vita Nova* invents for the *Paris Match* image: the video and exhibition play off of Barthes’s desire for a “new life”—one for which he referenced Dante’s *La Vita Nuova* in imagining the necessarily different form of existence entailed in becoming a novelist—which, at the same time, would also put to death an old life.

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47 See Roland Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel: Lecture, Courses and Seminars at the Collège de France (1978–1979 and 1979–1980)*, trans. Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 5. The author writes: “Now, for someone who writes, who has chosen to write, that is to say, for someone who has *experienced the jouissance, the joy of writing* (not unlike the ‘first pleasure’), there can be no other *Vita Nova* (or so it seems to me) than the discovery of a new writing practice.”
Taking Barthes’s lead, Meessen’s projects play on the multiplication of identity at work in Barthes’s own writings, particularly in *Third Text* (2011), in which Meessen hung one of the author’s short articles on the wall, reproduced it in three languages, and illuminated it with spotlights in primary colors. The text, “Barthes to the Power of Three,” was originally published in the magazine *La Quinzaine* in 1975 (also presented in the Khiasma/Netwerk exhibition), for which the author reviewed his own autobiography *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. The playful result brought about a triadic division of the writer’s identity, who appeared simultaneously as author, subject, and critic of his work. The distribution realizes some unexpected implications of Barthes’s earlier discussion of the fragmentations of authorship in his classic essay “The Death of the Author,” leading to the author(s) that Meessen brings back to life.

The significance of these creative sleights of hand is that Meessen doesn’t use Barthes’s purportedly disavowed family history as context for a corrective, truthful, and more definitive documentary account of the past. Rather, Barthes is shown to have carried out his own “auto mythologization” when performing his critical decoding of colonial mythology and elaborating his own numerous identities, a mythologizing revealed subsequently by Meessen as the ultimate truth.
of documentary representation, historical construction, archival assembly, and semiological criticism. That is to say, no “truth” is certain; no narrative, objective or definitive—neither exists beyond the author’s interpretive point-of-view, the reader’s subjective understanding, and the workings of disavowal and repression. In addition, this mythologizing can function as a way to attack myth itself. As Barthes himself professed in “Myth Today”: “Truth to tell, the best weapon against myth is perhaps to mythify it in its turn, and to produce an artificial myth. And this reconstituted myth will in fact be a mythology. Since myth robs language of something, why not rob myth?” Such is the significance of Factitius (2011), Meessen’s realistic sculptural bronze rendition of “bananas,” which rested on the documents dispersed throughout the exhibition space. The title draws on the Latin term, meaning “fabricated,” which, as Meessen observes, also serves as the origin of the etymologically related but opposite-meaning words such as “fact,” “fiction,” and “fetish.” In this regard, there can be no simple opposition between fact and fiction; rather, the one produces the other.

It is the slipperiness between these significations, and the embracing of a certain “ontological anarchy,” that facilitates Meessen’s unleashing of ghosts without pretending to capture them in a subsequent narration. As he explains:

I try to make History legible as a stratification of competing regimes of enunciation: the History of a defeated person whose memory temporarily fails him, the written History of names and dates recited at school, the oral and legendary History told in the village, all of this is a little bit the lost time of narrative. But in parallel, another history is slowly constructed, which functions as the elucidation of the punctum of the Paris Match photo. Yet for Barthes, this punctum is always personal and intimate because it is the thing that moves you so in certain photos, which you cannot put a name to.

Here it is important to be clear: proposing a punctum for the Paris Match image is far from a simple matter of recovering a repressed history; rather, it entails pointing to the impossibility of Barthes’s negation of that history. It involves calling attention to its lingering presence, the way that history lived on in Barthes’s work, even as he failed to acknowledge it directly. It means identifying the disconcerting presence of an absence. In other words, such a hauntology exposes the presence of a “radical non-negativity,” in the words Steven Shaviro uses to point out that which refuses to be

48 This aspect resonates with the wider developments in contemporary art’s “archival impulse” and the “artist as historian,” where recent practice—which acknowledges subjective contingency and narrative openness—differs from earlier versions of documentary practice that pursued the goal of an objective and definitive truth. See Hal Foster, “An Archival Impulse,” October, no. 110 (Fall 2004); and Mark Godfrey, “The Artist as Historian,” October, no. 120 (Spring 2007).
50 This refers to Jacques Rancière’s repositioning of the role of fiction, as in his essay “Documentary Fiction,” 158: “Fiction’ is not a pretty story or evil lie, the flipside of reality that people try to pass off for it. Originally, fingere doesn’t mean ‘to feign’ but ‘to forge.’ Fiction means using the means of art to construct a ‘system’ of represented actions, assembled forms, and internally coherent signs.”
put to rest. For Shaviro, the ghostly trace becomes "a kind of residual, quasimaterial insistence, that disrupts and ruins every movement of negation or negativity. That’s what the ghost is, after all: something that is gone, or dead, but that refuses to be altogether absent; something that is not here, not now, but that continues to stain or contaminate or affect or impinge upon the here and now."53 In other words, this radical non-negativity points to the way photography, as a ghostly non-presence, or as the disturbing presence of an absence, repeatedly calls attention to the colonial past in Barthes’s work—from the image of de Brazza in Camera Lucida, to the portrait of his colonist grandfather in Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes—yet in a way that could not be directly addressed or historically elaborated. We are left with the traces of a disavowal, one that will not quite go away.

Vincent Meessen, still from Vita Nova, 2009

From here we can reassess the significance of *Vita Nova*: if it offers a new life to historical documents, like the cover of *Paris Match*, then this life is open, transformative, and partly unnamed. This aspect is exemplified when the video, toward its end, shows Kaboré receiving a copy of the magazine—the first time he has ever seen the issue—fifty years after the photographs taken of him appeared in it (and the first time we see the whole cover). The moving encounter enables a certain remembrance to occur, experienced by Kaboré and shared with his grandchildren, as shown in the video. These figures become caught in the swirl of a cyclical history that is mutually estranging: the old man returns to his own image, which is given a second life, but it is one that renders him unrecognizable from age. Similarly, his grandsons recognize themselves uncannily in the image of their grandfather as a boy, but the historical context is completely different. Rather than reconstructing past events *retrospectively*, then, Meessen’s work provokes new and future events *prospectively*. Its modeling of performative documentary thus offers a mixture of historical documents, storytelling and fabulation, and unscripted social situations, all of which converge in a transformative moment in the present and construct a creative pedagogy for the future. Kobena Mercer points out the redemptive aspect of this gesture: “Giving a new life or a second life to images of colonised subjects who would otherwise be unnamed and unknown, Meessen’s film enacts a postcolonial gesture of ‘redemptive return’ whereby archival material, instead of being dead and buried in the past, flashes up into contemporary time in a critical moment of delayed awakening that reveals the unfinished afterlife of the colonial relation.”[^54] Yet if it does so, then *Vita Nova* reveals that the historical image’s meaning will remain forever unfinished, ever capable of producing new mythologies, ever holding the potential to animate new ghosts.

This modeling of performative documentary is demonstrated in the film’s scenes portraying an outdoor cinema that Meessen reconstructed at the former Ouagadougou cadets’ barracks (which today has become a high school), Burkinabés are shown watching passages from *La force noire*, a 2007 film by Eric Deroo, which offers an official account of the colonized African people’s participation in France’s wars, with footage drawn from the French Ministry of Defense’s archives. A spiraling history unfolds in Meessen’s filmic montage that joins these distinct events. For instance, the film shows African troops parading in the Palais des Sports—as the Vel’ d’Hiv, the old indoor cycle track, was renamed after the war, in part to distance the site from its notorious past when it had been used as an assembly point for those deported to the death camps during World War II[^55]. In this sense, the fact that Les Nuits de L’Armée took place there in 1955 proposes an appalling connection between the history of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust and French colonialism. Yet now, it is the Africans who appear as the spectators, owing to the intercutting of shots in *Vita Nova*: they watch their earlier selves and observe the original French audience a half century later. Do they now sit in judgment of that colonial spectacle, of that celebration of militarism and French patriotism against the backdrop of complicity in racism and genocide? Are its menacing ghosts finally put to rest when this history of oppression and domination is brought to a measure of historiographic justice? While this conclusion may be one we can never verify—and thus only speculate upon—we do witness a transgenerational transmission, where the now-grandfather-aged


[^55]: The 1955 Palais des Sports is distinct from the stadium built in 1960 after the Vel’ d’Hiv burned down in 1959.
men share their nearly forgotten experiences of those earlier colonial days with their grandchildren, some of whom serve in the military of independent Burkina Faso. History becomes a medium of repetition and difference—recalling, according to Barthes, the punctum of the “lacerating of time”; for Derrida, that which “de-synchronizes” and “recalls us to anachrony.” As Vita Nova’s narrator explains, reincarnating the words of Barthes: “History is a spiral. Time brings back previous states, but the spiral’s circles expand, none ever produces its exact copy. History is as a polyphonic of strokes of light and mist that answer each other constantly. On the spiral’s trajectory, everything recurs, but in another higher place, it is the return of difference, the movement of metaphor, it is Fiction.”

While Vita Nova constructs an educational exercise that catalyzes remembrance in the postcolonial present, it simultaneously offers a critical history of French literary discourse from the 1950s, when authors such as Barthes contributed to the exposure and critique of imperialist visual culture. Yet even as Barthes’s pathbreaking analysis contributed to the delegitimation of colonial mythology, his writings also disavow the complicities and responsibilities that were closer to home. It is in this disavowal that Vita Nova intervenes. First, in addressing Barthes’s early semio-critique of colonial ideology, the video speculates about the punctum that implicates the personal history haunting Barthes’s texts, which enacted an erasure that also uncannily revealed the repressed. Here, hauntology finds its definition in the negative ontology of representation: “The spectral is not,” Derrida writes. It is “neither substance, nor essence, nor existence. [It] is never present as such.”

Second, the film exposes and rejects the subjective phenomenology of Camera Lucida, which typifies Barthes’s move away from ideological critique and, more specifically, his disavowal of the political image economy of colonialism, which as we have seen was intertwined with his family history. In the end, we are led to conclude that Barthes’s later analytical tendencies corresponded to a revealing repression, one that reappeared in Barthes’s work in its very non-negativity: in its ghostly presence, as magnified in Meessen’s art. As such, Vita Nova contributes to the work of historical recovery. For its hauntology, furthermore, serves as a model for how the punctum and studium might find some reconnection, if not reconciliation, in an experimental historiography both subjectively implicative, historically and politically aware, and sensitive to representational complexity. Such a historiography would be founded not on the easy availability of historical presence, but rather on the impossibility of history’s totalizing impulse, on the insistence of the radical non-negativity that haunts historical consciousness and representation. It would thereby

56 Barthes, Camera Lucida, 96; and Derrida, Specters of Marx, 6–7.
57 As is typical of the film, these quotes are worked into the film’s narrative without citation—and thereby demonstrate a further act of creative reinvention of Barthes’s voice. This one is from Roland Barthes, Essais critiques (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1981), 89.
58 Derrida, exordium to Specters of Marx, xix.
59 In some ways this latter proposal offers a redemptive possibility for art history, which has frequently opted to follow Barthes’s own turn away from the studium to a concern with the punctum, but one elevated to the level of structural necessity—often understood as a function of trauma—rather than subjective preference as it was with Barthes. The result is that historical subject matter is altogether sacrificed. For example, consider Benjamin H. D. Buchloh’s reading of Gerhard Richter in “The Anemic Archive,” October, no. 88 (Spring 1999); and Hal Foster’s reading of Warhol in “Death in America,” October, no. 75 (Winter 1996); which risk such a sacrifice of history in favor of the historicity of the punctum’s formal determinations.
challenge all historicism that is founded upon a strict sense of chronology or that conceptually solidifies the past\textsuperscript{60}.

Finally, these points identify the particular significance of Meessen’s work in the present, in a context where French culture, education, and politics—like much of European discourse from the Netherlands to Italy, Belgium to Germany—have been moving toward a neo-revisionist “imperial winter,” one defined by a growing historical amnesia matched, not surprisingly, by a colonial nostalgia\textsuperscript{61}. Indeed, postcolonial studies has received a conspicuously delayed reception in France, coming to light only in the last decade (despite the rich history of resistance movements in the colonies, and the theoretical analyses by writers such as Fanon, Césaire, and Albert Memmi), and remains at best a continually embattled discipline there. It is one whose belated appearance corresponds to right-wing efforts to renounce inherited traditions of internationalism and anticolonialism and, likewise, to rid the country of its complex legacy of Marxism and the memory of the social and political struggles of 1968—including the solidarity movement with the Third World\textsuperscript{62}. Such cannot be unrelated to the politics of anti-multiculturalism, which, in denying the violence and negative legacy of the colonial past, makes it all the easier to continue its logic whether in relation to the attacks on immigration or in terms of the neocolonial maintenance of relations of inequality between the North and South as exploited by Western political and economic elites. Not that Barthes’s political position is continuous with this conservative turn, but his overdetermined silence does testify to the hidden depths of colonialism’s immersion even in the past of its own critique. To investigate that past today, as \textit{Vita Nova} does, is all the more urgent in the reinvention of a different future—a future beyond colonialism.

\textsuperscript{60} On the historiographic implications of ghosts, see Peter Buse and Andrew Scott, eds., \textit{Ghosts: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, History} (London: Macmillan, 1999).


\textsuperscript{62} On the cultural and intellectual disavowals of the radical lessons of May ’68, see Kristin Ross, \textit{May ’68 and Its Afterlives} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).