10

The possibility of an 'Us': Yasujiro Ozu's legacy in Alain Gomis' cinema

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Introduction

This chapter offers a comparative study of the work of Franco-Senegalese filmmaker Alain Gomis and Japanese filmmaker Yasujiro Ozu in order to examine the legacy of the latter and how this may be reflected in Gomis' four, first feature-length films, *L'Afrance/As a Man* (2001) and *Andalucia/ Andalusia* (2007), *Tey/ Today* (2012) and *Félicité* (2017). These films by Gomis are put in conversation with three films by Yasujiro Ozu: *I Was Born But …* (*Umarete wa mita keredo*, 1932); the latter's remake in colour over two decades afterwards, *Good Morning (Ohayō,* 1959); and *Tokyo Story* (*Tōkyō Monogatari,* 1953). Through our conversation – bringing our respective knowledge of Senegalese and Japanese cinema to bear on our analysis – we try to imagine a cinematic 'us' that extends the world of onscreen homes and their inhabitants from a local level to a more global 'screen world'. What follows is a dialogical piece, which explores the legacy of Ozu's work in Gomis' cinema, not as a mere souvenir or initial encounter, but rather as an ever-present influence in his work, and the relation between film characters and the spaces in which they dwell, as Figure 10.1 creatively implies. We focus on three main dimensions: the aesthetics, themes and tone of both filmmakers. In the process we will also uncover a further quality, beneath the surface, that can be traced as

FIGURE 10.1 *Collage merging* Tey *(Alain Gomis, 2012) and* Good Morning *(Yasujiro Ozu, 1959) over a world map with the pinned locations of the two films, Senegal and Japan, respectively © Osphere Films. Elaborated by Estrella Sendra for the purpose of this chapter (2022).*

a form of clear cinematic lineage, from Japan, to France, Senegal and, by extension, the world.

L'Afrance/As a Man is Alain Gomis' first feature-length film. Set in the transitional period to the new millennium, in 2000, *L'Afrance* is a story about the human quest for identity and belonging, an experience enhanced in postcolonial urban contexts. In the film, El Hadj is a Senegalese mature student based in Paris whose presence in the French metropolis is shaped by his feeling of the need to return home, and his continuous temporal and spatial struggles between the remembered Senegal, the present experience in Paris and future expectations. The hostility is exacerbated by the expiration date of El Hadj's residence card. Such human quests for identity and belonging are also the theme of Gomis' following films.

In *Andalucia*, the leading character is Yacine, a young man of Algerian heritage who keeps changing jobs. This is due to the inability to settle in what seems like an alien Paris. Through diverse encounters along the way, Yacine meets Djibril, an old Senegalese friend from his childhood. The convergence between the past and the present through this character leads towards a projected future, a place where Yacine finally feels at ease, recognizing himself in the people and spaces around him. This place is not Algeria, but Andalusia, in the south of Spain.[1]

[1] Andalusia is also where I, Estrella, am from.

The crucial role of time in Gomis' existential cinema also becomes evident in *Tey*, a title in Wolof which translates as *Today*, and where death becomes an unavoidable threat. We meet Satché, a man who returns to Senegal, after being based abroad for years that may have felt like an eternity for beloved ones who remained. However, as he arrives, the joy from both him and those who had long awaited the moment is interrupted by the announcement that he is going to die the following day. Satché thus engages in an already-initiated intimate journey. He wanders around the streets, meeting with people from postcolonial Dakar, a 'ruin of utopia' (de Jong and Quinn 2014). As he does, Satché reviews his life from a present whose future is due to end the very next day.

The geographical location changes in Gomis' *Félicité*, set in Kinshasa, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, yet the postcolonial urban condition of inequality experienced by its inhabitants remains the same. In this case, the film is led by a woman, a heroine, whose everyday life struggle is once more put into focus by a particular incident, her son's motorbike accident. With her son at risk of losing his leg, Félicité starts fundraising to gather the amount to be paid in advance for the surgery needed for her son.

I Was Born But … focuses on two young brothers whose admiration for their father is shaken when they see him kowtowing in a subservient manner to his boss. Following a significant tantrum, the boys go on hunger strike, but eventually reconcile with their father, learning valuable life lessons in the process. *Good Morning* updates the story of *I Was Born But …* for a post-war setting, focusing again on two young brothers and their struggles when confronted by the intricate social dynamics and peer pressure found in the world of adults. Their neighbour's television set becomes an object of envy, and just as in Ozu's earlier film, the boys stage a comedic strike against their parents, finally resolved when their parents buy a television of their own. *Tokyo Story*, typically regarded as Ozu's masterpiece, tells a powerful family drama focusing on elderly couple Shukichi and Tomi, and their adult children. As Tomi falls sick and eventually dies, we see the younger generation react in different ways; some begrudge the hassle of putting up with their ageing parents, while the selfless Noriko (widow of second son Shoji, who died in the war) resigns herself to a life of solitude.

In search of a 'cinematic us'

One of the encounters that has led to this analysis took place on 9 November 2013, during a personal interview between I, Estrella and the filmmaker Alain Gomis following a screening of *Tey* and a director's talk at the BFI in

Southbank during Film Africa in London. In the interview, Alain Gomis, who is based between Dakar and Paris, spoke about his first memories of cinema:

> One of my first memories of cinema was a film by Ozu, […] a Japanese film titled *Gosses de Tokyo* [*I was Born, But …*]. It is just the story of two children who change neighbourhood with their family, to Tokyo, in the outskirts of Tokyo. When I watched that film, those two children, I knew them. It was as if it was me. What I mean is that sometimes with films that come from a country which is very foreign to you, you can learn very profound things about yourself. And to me, cinema, like music, has that thing there. You may not necessarily be able to put it into words, but it can foster certain things in you which are links that cross continents, cross countries. It is precisely in that particular moment that I find cinema beautiful. Because for some time we can say 'us', and that is certainly one of the most beautiful words, I think, in every language, to be able to say 'us'. To me, there lies the beauty of cinema (Alain Gomis, pers. comm. with Sendra 2013). [Listen to the original filmed quote by scanning the QR code below.][2]

The Japanese film that influenced the filmmaker at such a young age is one of the landmarks of Yasujiro Ozu's oeuvre, with a remake in 1959 entitled *Good Morning* (Ozu's second film in full colour). When the editors of this volume opened a call for comparative studies of global screen worlds, conducted in collaborative dialogue, in order to 'forge new networks and channels of communication' (Yoshimoto 2013: 60, cited in the Call for Submissions), we felt compelled to revisit this beautiful quote, through a dialogue between two film scholars with regional interests in Japan and Senegal, respectively. Like Gomis, as film audiences and scholars, we have both been moved by films from countries initially 'very foreign to us', quoting Gomis. Screen worlds, as art, are moving images with the ability to resonate across and beyond borders, becoming tactile.

[2] Also available at (2021): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=40UpNuFDUkg.

In search of such a 'cinematic us', we adopt a dialogical, practice-based methodology, in order, first of all, to *perform* each of our own encounters with these filmmakers, thus sharing our positionalities (as white European scholars with a regional interest in screen worlds beyond Europe); and secondly, to try to build a 'cinematic us', through being *in conversation with* each other and the films, without dismissing or hiding the potential rifts and anxieties that may emerge from this endeavour. We have been inspired, in this respect, by a recent special issue on 'Decolonising Film Education' published by *Film Education Journal*, where the guest editors, Jyoti Mistry and Lizelle Bisschoff, adopt a conversational format, to share their approaches to decolonizing film education (2022).

Estrella: I have not been able to forget that interview. Neither have I tried … But having listened to Gomis for two Q&As that lasted about an hour each, after the screening of his films *L'Afrance* and *Tey*, and for almost another hour in a one-to-one interview with me, that specific section of the interview kept resounding, somewhere very visceral inside me. It was that point on beauty, really, the beauty of the unexpected and magical encounter with what we could have thought of as 'foreign' film worlds. But also, Gomis' understanding of what constitutes 'the beauty of cinema', as a moment of encounter, identification and communion beyond geographical boundaries, in the context of an African film festival in London, had a profound impact on me. It had a 'deeply somatic' effect, experienced through the body. This is what Elaine Scarry suggests happens when we encounter beauty (2001: 111). To her, 'when we see something beautiful, we undergo a *radical decentering*' (Scarry 2001: 111, our emphasis), a term which we would like to connect here to that of a 'screen world'. This accounts for diegetic (fictional) and extra-diegetic (non-fictional) beings, such as filmmakers, audiences and academics. It becomes an affective experience, a gesture, a heuristic device through which we can explore encounters even in their apparent dis-junctures. In the words of Elaine Scarry, 'radical decentering' refers to the process of

> letting the ground rotate beneath us several inches, so that when we land, we find we are standing in a different relation to the world than we were a moment before. It is not that we cease to stand at the center of the world, for we never stood there. It is that we cease to stand even at the center of our own world. We willingly cede our ground to the thing that stands before us.
>
> (Scarry 2001: 112)

African cinema is rarely discussed in terms of aesthetics. There tends to be an overly political reading of it, associating it to either entertainment or

militancy, in what are treated as complete binary opposites. This is precisely what Manthia Diawara was trying to contest, in his emblematic book *African Film: New Forms of Aesthetics and Politics* (2010), an open discussion continued by the work of James S. Williams (2019). Through this comparative study, we seek to engage in scholarship on aesthetics by questioning: how do we recognize beauty across different contexts and film aesthetics? Aware of the problematic curatorial conceptualization and performances of 'world cinema', often understood as peripheral to 'Western' Euro-American cinema, we join the proposal by the Screen Worlds Collective to instead think about screen worlds, as affective time-spaces built horizontally, from an empathetic gaze. This resonates, once more, with Scarry's writing on beauty as an act an experience of radical decentring, when she suggests:

> Radical decentering might also be called an opiated adjacency. A beautiful thing is not the only thing in the world that can make us feel adjacent; nor is it the only thing in the world that brings a state of acute pleasure. But it appears to be one of the few phenomena in the world that brings about both simultaneously: it permits us to be adjacent while also permitting us to experience extreme pleasure, thereby creating the sense that it is our own adjacency that is pleasure-bearing. This seems a gift in its own right, and a gift as a prelude to or precondition of enjoying fair relations with others. It is clear that an *ethical fairness* which requires 'a symmetry of everyone's relation' will be greatly assisted by an *aesthetic fairness* that creates in all participants a state of delight in their own lateralness.
>
> (Scarry 2001: 114)

My first encounter with Alain Gomis' cinema was in a particularly transnational personal context. A few months after returning to London from Dakar, where I had hosted a screening of my documentary film on African migration to Spain, *Témoignages de l'autre côté/Testimonials from the other side* (2012) and worked as a journalist for the cultural section of the Senegalese newspaper *Le Soleil*, I volunteered as a media officer for the 9th African Film Festival of Cordoba-FCAT, which was also screening my documentary. It was then that I first saw *Tey*, followed by a discussion with its producer, Eric Idriss-Kanago. The film left the audience and jury members astonished and was awarded the Best Feature Length Film. A few weeks later, *Tey* reached London screens as part of Film Africa, with Djolof Mbengue present for the discussion following the screening in the Hackney Picture House, East London, translated live by me, fostering an increasing multi-sensory proximity with the film.

The following edition of Film Africa, in 2013, curated a retrospective of Gomis' work, a double bill of *L'Afrance/As a Man* (2001) and *Andalucia/*

FIGURE 10.2 *Alain Gomis in conversation with Suzy Gillett (left) and Isabel Moura Mendes (right) at the BFI following the screening of* Tey *at Film Africa 2013 © Estrella Sendra, 19 November 2013.*

Andalusia (2007) at the Ritzy Cinema, and of *Tey/Today* (2012) and Ousmane Sembène's short film *Borom Sarret/The owner of the wheelcart* (1963), both followed by a lengthy discussion with Alain Gomis (see Figure 10.2). Crowds of cosmopolitan Londoners kept stopping him as he left the cinema, echoing Satché's celebrated stroll across the streets of Dakar in the film *Tey.* However, Alain Gomis still made himself available for the requested interview with me, which was published in *Le Soleil* on 19 November 2013, with the title « Avec le cinéma, on peut atteindre des liens qui traversent les continents »[3] (Sendra 2013: 16). As the media coverage increased, the reference to Ozu's *I Was Born But* … kept appearing: 'Weirdly, I had the impression that it [the film] talked to me, while it was a silent film set in the outskirts of Tokyo. That really struck me, because I had the impression it talked about me', shared Gomis in an interview with Claude Forest for *Africultures* (2017). Years afterwards, on 14 November 2019, the Raw Material Company in Dakar hosted a film screening of *Gosses de Tokyo/I Was Born But …* (Yasujiro Ozu 1932), curated by Alain Gomis, at the Cinéma Empire, preceded by a talk by him on the influence of this film on his filmmaking.

[3] With cinema, we can create links that traverse the continents. (Free translation by Estrella Sendra.)

Laurence: The foundational cornerstones of inter-border negotiations between Ozu's cinema and the works of other directors inspired or influenced by his work have been laid in classic discussions such as that by Geist (1983) and her identification of a 'West looks East' impetus in certain styles of European cinema. Likewise, there is a growing discourse regarding current directorial talent that is heavily influenced by Ozu's iconic visual aesthetic, both within Japan – such as Hirokazu Koreeda (Desser 2007: 273) – and without – for example, Wes Anderson (Chamberlain 2015: 44). In 2011, a release campaign by the British Film Institute (BFI) sought to offer a chronological re-appraisal of Ozu's works, pairing together thematically similar works from the director's pre- and post-1945 material.[4] While this did much to widen the accessibility and appreciation of Ozu's films, we suggest that there is more to be done. Much of this revolves around the idea of there being something beyond a quintessential vision of Japan – its affectual, aesthetic, comedic markers – and the sense that while many of these are inherently wrapped up in Ozu's style, it is this very same style that also holds the capacity to transcend national borders.

Close, formal analysis of Ozu's cinema and its aesthetics has had an especially rich history dating back to Richie's 'first monograph' in English on the director, through to Bordwell's *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema* (1988) and beyond. These studies have contributed to a remarkably sophisticated body of work, a continuing attempt to get to the heart of the 'structure of feeling' present in its 'minute manipulations' of form (Nornes, 85–6). A sizable body of Japanese scholarship on Ozu – typified by studies such as those by Sakamura and Hasumi (1998), Yamada (2002) and Yoshida (2003) – further adds to the analytical toolkit available when discussing his films, the latter in particular highlighting Ozu's 'uneasy and distorted forms of expression' (Yoshida 2003: 148), something at odds with the films' often placid surface level. As we have attempted to illustrate above, this incredibly strong aesthetic foundation offers one means at building out links to the work of Gomis, to provide a supportive backbone to the 'us' that Gomis felt resonated between these two cinemas from opposite sides of the world.

The selected titles for analysis are informed by my own personal experiences encountering Ozu's work during my time as a student on SOAS' MA Japanese Studies programme in which these films formed part of the core syllabus of material assigned on the Japanese cinema modules. On both initial and repeat viewings of all three films, the sheer aesthetic impulse of Ozu's style was

[4] The full press release introducing the BFI's Ozu Collection is accessible at: https://www2.bfi.org.uk/sites/bfi.org.uk/files/downloads/bfi-press-release-more-yasujiro-ozu-dual-format-edition-releases-from-the-bfi-2011-05-04.pdf – In each paired release, the earlier film had never before been made available in the UK.

what left the strongest imprint in my mind – something which has become emphasized further on revisiting them for this chapter, and now considering this impulse as a living, evolving quality that holds tantalizing prospects for global synergies when observed in the works of other directors.

While it is too early to make claims about the influence of Alain Gomis' work on others, within the growing literature on his work comparisons have been made between his cinema and that of other Senegalese filmmakers, such as Djibril Diop Mambéty, Ousmane Sembène, Khady Sylla, Hubert Laba Ndao and Joseph Gaï Ramaka, with brief comparisons to the work of further African and non-African filmmakers, with specific reference to the portrayal of Dakar, and the postcolonial urban space, more broadly (Williams 2019: 91–137).

Finding 'us' in the film themes: The centrality of family

Through our dialogue on our initial encounters with these filmmakers, we have argued that finding a 'cinematic us' in Ozu and Gomis' filmography is possible through an act of 'radical decentering' able to establish an 'aesthetic fairness', as a result of an 'opiated adjacency' (Scarry 2001: 114). In one of the most significant academic publications devoted to Alain Gomis' work, Daniela Ricci suggests that *L'Afrance* is 'a universal story of human destiny' (2020: 131). If the work of both filmmakers centres around the interiority of the characters, and the aesthetic offers a means of articulating that interiority, then how does this inner space manifest in the aesthetics of the world they inhabit?

Central to both directors' work is the role of the family, a collective 'us' and what brings us together. Perhaps more crucially, both directors draw our attention to the tensions generated by the individual – the focal point – within the family, and what turns us from individuals into a community, a family. For Ozu, Richie notes, 'the whole world exists in one family' (Richie 1959: 21), and, if other characters do intersect, it is purely to further build on that familial nexus at the heart of the cinematic object. In Gomis, the family becomes a site of performance of the tensions resulting from a world shaped by a postcolonial context, and the multi-temporal expectations of the different family members. Within the focus on family, parent-children relationships are of particular importance.

Both in *I Was Born But …* and *Félicité*, parents are depicted as strict. Yet they all share a deep sense of care and devotion beneath this outer roughness. In *I Was Born But …,* the children are presented in direct opposition to their

father and are unwilling to fall into the same predicament as him, caught in a frustrating existence as a dogsbody, beholden to those higher in the social order. A similar dynamic appears in *Félicité,* where a final scene shows a peaceful home setting, featuring Félicité, her love interest and her son, following a stressful period triggered by her son's motorbike accident. What ultimately draws the films together is the clear desire, from the parental generation, for a better life for their children. It is this self-sacrifice, ultimately, that becomes the counterpoint of hope amidst bleak times. In a telling line in *I Was Born But …* we hear the parents observe their children's behaviour with the wisdom of age: 'These problems will be within them for the rest of their lives.'

The separation and reunion – both spatially and emotionally – of parents and children provides a powerful undercurrent to the often more overt themes of duty and sacrifice in Ozu's cinema. For Hogan, these bonds contain a universality to them that is driven by the ethics of attachment, of adjusting to the vulnerabilities of others, and most crucially, of 'fulfilling one's own obligations, whether the other party fulfills theirs or not' (Hogan 2010: 5). This is also the case with El Hadj, the protagonist in *L'Afrance*. The character is overwhelmingly at odds with a myriad of expectations from his family members, shaping his own, which makes it difficult to address the question of return.

Interior and exterior space: Finding Ozu in Gomis' (beautiful) cinema

Despite the historical 'narrative of exclusion' of African cinema in festivals, cinema venues and film studies (Dovey 2015: 50), African film scholars have asserted that 'black African cinema has attained aesthetic and artistic maturity' (Ukadike 1994: 4). It 'has become highly critical (…) to define its own aesthetic preferences with which it chooses to address issues concerning African transformation' (Ukadike 1994: 308). However, as Ukadike notes, 'there is no one African cinema' (1994: 308) and thus no one African aesthetic approach, which is reflected in the discomfort African filmmakers sometimes express feeling when solely labelled as African (Barlet 2000). This chapter seeks precisely to move beyond that label, exploring the possibility of an 'us', in a medium that relies on an audiovisual and multisensory language, thus accessible beyond geographical boundaries. This ability to find an 'us', through identification, is where, according to Gomis, beauty lies in cinema. However, in a recent publication on aesthetics in contemporary African cinema, James S. Williams opens with what could be considered a provocative statement: 'In African cinema, beauty is trouble'

(Williams 2019: 1). The main concern among filmmakers when finally liberated from centuries of colonialism was to use cinema as a weapon for decolonization, 'not only for Africans but also by Africans' (Ukadike 1994: 309). They portrayed 'Africa from an African perspective' (Ukadike 1994: 304). However, seeing this as incompatible with beauty is both misleading and reductive (Williams 2019: 11; Niang 2014: 126).

In our aim to find Ozu in Gomis' beautiful cinema, hereafter we focus on aesthetics, that is, the stylistic approach in their filmmaking practices. Gomis' aesthetic approach has been studied as an example of Naficy's 'accented cinema' (Naficy 2001), characterized by its intimacy, embodiment and multisensorial depiction of displacement (Sendra 2018a; Sendra 2018b), in a Mambétian 'dreamlike vision' (Barlet and Thackway 2013) as well as an immersive liminality (Williams 2019). Similarly, viewership and critical response to Ozu's cinema have been defined by a focus on 'aestheticism' (Nornes 2007: 79), spurred on by landmark treatments such as those by Richie, who famously helped perpetuate the line, as quoted earlier, that Ozu was the 'most Japanese' of all Japanese directors, in possession of a 'real Japanese flavor' (Richie 1959: 18). Indeed, Richie himself would be fundamental in concentrating his critical treatment of Ozu around precisely this question of aestheticism, constructing a sophisticated 'stylistic analysis' which he came to call the 'syntax of his films' (Richie 1963: 11).

The focus on two directors from different geographical locations yet whose films constitute a 'meeting point', in Gomis' words (Gomis, pers. comm. 2013), invites reflection on the aesthetic form of space. People and places mingle throughout the works of both directors – in Gomis' work, *L'Afrance / As a Man* (2001) and *Andalucia / Andalusia* (2007) speak directly in their titles to ambiguous spatial entities that are as much a domain of the mind as they are a real-word locale. His first feature-length film's French title – *L'Afrance* – merges a range of spaces: *L'Afrique* [Africa], *La France* [France], *la France dans l'Afrique* [France in Africa], *l'Afrique dans la France* [Africa in France], *l'A-France* [A-France] and *Françafrique*. The film switches between Paris and Dakar, in flashbacks that are ever-present in the psychological space inhabited by El Hadj, a young Senegalese man who moved to Paris to complete his studies in Higher Education, but who feels a responsibility to physically return to Senegal (Sendra 2018a: 363). In *Andalucia*, the director chooses for the title the space where the main character, Yacine, a French-born citizen of Algerian parents, would find inner peace by the end of the film, through a feeling of unexplained identification, arguably similar to what Gomis described when watching the children in Ozu's *I was Born But* …

In contrast, Gomis' film *Tey*, which translates into 'today', may seem to refer instead to a temporal dimension. However, it cannot be comprehended without

a focus on space as well. As James S. Williams notes, 'this meditative study of a young man coming to terms with his own mortality is also a poetic, existential journey through the streets of Dakar' (2019: 107). The postcolonial city appears (see Figure 10.3), like Satché, the leading character, 'in mid-construction', in 'state of decomposition', 'in regression and displacement', through 'topographical hints and signs that remind us that we are actually in Dakar' (Williams 2019: 107–8). It is, borrowing Felwine Sarr's words, a 'palimpsest city', multi-layered, in continuous movement and creation (Sarr 2019: 107). It is an 'Afrotopia', shaped by the delocalization of its presence in a perpetual future (Sarr 2019). Likewise, in *Félicité* (2017), while the film's namesake character is the locus that drives its narrative forward, the events on screen are every bit the tale of its Kinshasa setting as they are a story of its inhabitants. Through the streets, the pockets of domestic space, and the institutional facilities, a collage-like map of inhabitation and the very human lifeblood that runs through it are constructed. It is this same technique that we might read in Ozu – most obviously in *Tokyo Story* (1953), quite literally a story of Tokyo – but also in his other works, in which through the lens of singular families, we are given a kind of filmic, narrative stand-in for the life of the city as a whole.

Holt-Damant's work on the 'constructs of space' in Ozu's cinema is particularly useful here, focusing as it does on his 'drawing out small, unseen details and spatial relationships through a rigorous process of editing'. Much of this is seen as rooted in the drives of Modernism

FIGURE 10.3 *Satché (Saul Williams) and his friend Sélé (Djolof Mbengue) walking in the Ancien Palais de la Justice (former Court of Justice), in* Tey *© Sphere Films 2012. All rights reserved.*

that had – from the late nineteenth century onward – been transforming approaches to space from the purely corporeal to something interpreted as a 'subjective experience' (Holt-Damant 2003: 5). In *Tey*, for example, the market as location (Figure 10.4) does not serve as a narrative device for daily shopping scenes. Rather, it is a space to strengthen Satché's psychological anxiety and existential crisis, as he is trying to cope with the idea of his imminent death (see figure 10.4). According to Williams, '*Tey* succeeds in making the cinematic experience of the city more concrete and immediate – an open, mobile space of impressions and sensations', with 'an impressively immersive feel' (Williams 2019: 109). In both *L'Afrance* and *Andalucia*, France is depicted as the 'alien-nation' (Sendra 2018a: 371), whose capital is much more hostile to characters like El Hadj and Yacine, than what appears as an iconic postcard on screen. This fiction remarkably illustrates the reconstruction of identity and the interior transformation of a character caught between a 'here' and 'there', which can just as equally be inverted (Ricci 2020: 156). It leads to a nonlinear narrative where the boundaries between reality and fiction are blurred, in the same way as the present, past and future temporalities, all intertwined in the character's psychological experience (Ricci 2020: 156).

This leads to an encounter between an inner and outer world. Drawing on the theories of Walter Benjamin, Holt-Damant suggests it is the focus afforded by the camera lens that would prove crucial to this dynamic, and that by 'examining objects in detail, one could discover an underlying structure which

FIGURE 10.4 *Satché feeling unwell in the market, in* Tey, *prior to being rescued by his friend Sélé © Sphere Films 2012. All rights reserved.*

we wouldn't normally notice' (Holt-Damant 2003: 1). This kind of underlying structure is present in the transitory dynamic Ozu establishes in his filmic spaces – one framed by passage between interiors and exteriors, both literally and subjectively. On the one hand, the 'internalised domestic world' of 'the Japanese house, the hierarchical family spanning a couple of generations', and on the other 'an externalized view of the countryside or industrial city' (Holt-Damant 2003: 5–6). It is precisely cinema's capacity – through its ability to 'join' spaces that are in reality unconnected – that facilitates bringing *us*, as viewers, closer to the characters that inhabit these interior and exterior zones.

Void spaces: Seemingly empty yet charged with emotion

The opening shots of Ozu's *Tokyo Story* are of the streets and canals, the forms of transportation that connect them and the people who traverse them – we see trains, boats, children walking to school (see figure 10.5). Very quickly, a visual shorthand is established in which the looser, jumbled angles of the city exterior contrast with a rigid formalism of tight right angles as we are drawn into interior settings. Inside, this composed framing reflects the corresponding routines of daily life – housework, cleaning – and a general sense of domestic tidiness that extends to the prim clothing and school uniforms. And yet, in spite of this apparent surface-level tranquillity, the constant bustle of bodies moving through space returns us, always, to the thrum of the city and its rhythms.

In the cities of Gomis' work – whether it be Paris, Dakar or Kinshasa – the more fluid approach to framing necessarily presents what at first seems to be a more naturalistic urban character, at odds with Ozu's formalism. As suggested by Williams, with reference to the representation of Dakar specifically in Gomis' work (but applicable to Kinshasa and Paris as well), the city 'appears precisely unframable and ungraspable, beyond cognitive mapping' (Williams 2019: 109). Dakar, in particular, represents Felwine Sarr's philosophical conceptualization of the Afrotopia, or, in the words of James S. Williams, 'the afropolis as an anonymous, frameless site of open danger and disorder' (2019: 114). In fact, according to Gomis '[i]f you're trying to find the right image of [Dakar], you can have a thousand images and still not have the perfect picture of [Dakar]. The real [Dakar] exists in the gaps between all those pictures' (Gomis, cited in Williams 2019: 91). It is, as cited before, a 'palimpsest city' (Sarr 2019).

In approaching the fragmented urban space, Gomis employs what Noel Burch names, with reference to Ozu's aesthetics, 'pillow shots' (Burch

FIGURE 10.5 Tokyo Story *directed by Yasujiro Ozu © Shochiku 1953. All rights reserved.*

1979), that is 'empty shots', cutaways, implying a sense of narrative duration (Figure 10.5). These shots act as cinematic pauses from the action, typically focusing on a landscape or object, and, while often on the surface 'empty', become charged with meaning when taken in the context of the action they precede or follow. In Gomis' work, one such example is to be found at the beginning of *L'Afrance.* El Hadj, who we have not yet met, is seen passing by the Eiffel Tower (Figure 10.6) – located in the distance, almost unreachable, yet an ever-(post)colonial presence in El Hadj's experience of Paris. The space contrasts with the dark images of the streets of Paris later walked by El Hadj, as he feels threatened by the recent expiration of his residence card.

Observation and self-reflexivity emerge again in an awareness of the nature of cinema itself. In *I Was Born, But …,* this is portrayed in its most literal sense as the characters engage in a kind of film-within-a-film experience, watching a movie in which the father figure stars in an embarrassing role that shames his children. In *Andalucia*, we see Yacine stand in a television showroom full of screens, moving images projected back at him. 'The spectator is searching for a way into the interior' writes Holt-Damant of Ozu's similar use of connective framing (2003: 5), but in this scene, we are left to ask who is the real spectator – us or Yacine?

FIGURE 10.6 *El Hadj walking near the Eiffel Tower, where some of his friends will later be seen selling miniature-size Eiffel Towers and souvenirs with the French flag © Sphere Films 2001. All rights reserved.*

A similar technique can also be achieved sonically. In *Félicité,* throughout the film, the narrative will on occasion trade places with sequences of an orchestra performing classical music – completely at odds with the sonic texture of the rest of the film. These scenes break our immersion, as viewers, reminding us of the manufactured nature of what we are consuming despite all their apparent naturalism. Music comes to symbolize a narrative short-hand for characters' 'inner emotional states' and their 'traits, thoughts and identities … at their most intimate' (Vasudevan 2016: 4); thus, we often get what appears to be the truest, most 'honest' view of *Félicité*'s characters in the many scenes soundtracked by the Le Kasai Allstars that take place at the local bar. The music 'becomes' their inner space; senses are given almost physical manifestation by way of the on-screen audiovisual ensemble.

Gomis' corruption or fracturing of this inner space can manifest in particularly striking ways – most notably in *L'Afrance* where, on the arrest of El Hadj, the filmic medium transitions to cheap, low-resolution digital video. We see him confined to the seat of a police car as it manoeuvres its way through the Parisian streets, the hemmed-in framing of the car windows a far cry from the vista-like landscapes seen elsewhere in the film. A further interstice between people and place can be found in gestures. Heat is constant, oppressive, and it is through the mannerisms of the characters swimming within it that the 'temperature' of the city is made real for the viewer on screen and given an embodied tangibility. This focus on gesture as a

medium by which to better paint large the characters' emotions for the viewer is also telling in how much of it is delivered through scenes in which there is a distinct *absence* of gesture.

The focus on gesture, and above all else on 'revelation of character' contributes to what we can observe in Ozu's cinema – and by extension, the work of Gomis too – in that the sense of time we observe 'is not clock-time, it is psychological time' (Richie 1963: 14). Or, for example, in Ozu's own words: 'The only way to overcome the cruelty of the everchanging present is to repeat it, to stop the linear flow of time, and to express it in the past tense' (Yoshida 2003: 141). Our experience, as viewers, is a response to this psychological state as mapped out aesthetically on screen to the extent that our viewing experience shifts from the exteriority of 'beyond the screen' to within both its dimensions, and the head-space of the characters within it. For Richie, writing of Ozu's 'portrait'-like cinema, he sees this effect best captured in the many non-spaces of his cinema, the 'waiting, listening' mode of his camera as it records the moments book-ending action and narrative, instead eliciting the 'true emotion' and heart of the characters in the spaces between the 'heights of emotion' (Richie 1963: 13). For some, Ozu's emotional orchestration of these kinds of scenes takes on an almost transcendental quality, encouraging a feeling for 'life as process' (Boyers 1978: 64).

In *I Was Born, But …,* some of the earliest scenes are of the film's young boyhood characters looking on, frowning. They are children, but they understand the rules and inequalities of the society around them all too well. These silences, in what is already a 'silent' movie, speak far more loudly and clearly than the actual written intertitles. Through the silence of these moments, we are invariably given some of Ozu's most emotionally moving, poignant scenes. Elsewhere, for example, in *Tokyo Story* where Noriko cries silently before sleeping, or her reaction on hearing – over the phone – that her mother-in-law is dying. In the latter instance, the silent interiority of Noriko's mind-state is torn apart as the film cuts suddenly to the noise of the city. Despite her inner turmoil, the city around her continues, unabated.[5] These void spaces, seemingly empty but simultaneously charged with emotion, occur time and again in the cinema of both Ozu and Gomis, and hint towards an influence from traditional Japanese aesthetics, as outlined by Geist:

> Ozu's art is informed by ma in its various aspects, particularly those of sabi, an awareness of the ephemeral, thus the importance of living from moment to moment; michiyuki, the regulation of movement from one place to

[5] While there is not the space to cover it in detail here, it is worth noting that this tone also suffuses Ozu's first post-war film *Record of a Tenement Gentleman* (*Nagaya shinshiroku,* 1947).

> another; hashi, the bridging of the void; and susabi, the empty place where phenomena appear, pass by, and disappear … The bridges, corridors, and alleyways that recur throughout Ozu's films are spaces that lead from one place to another. The recurrent trains in Ozu's films evoke both michiyuki and the empty space of susabi.
>
> (Geist 1983: 235)

It is in the light of analysis like this that we can question to what extent aesthetics are tied to nationality. Are we moving away from this as lines become increasingly blurred in this web of connectivity and influence? Reading the works of Ozu and Gomis through the lens of postcolonial discourse offers one potential avenue to exploring this interstice of aesthetics and nationality. While postcolonialism does not, perhaps, manifest as overtly in Ozu's cinema as it does in that of Gomis, we believe searching for it forms part of an important re-balancing as highlighted by the likes of Hogan, who comments that 'post-War Japan is rarely, if ever, examined in the context of postcolonial theory and criticism' (2010: 36). Those that have analysed Ozu's films through this postcolonial lens, such as Kate Taylor-Jones, see his work as characterized by the 'loss of one colonial narrative and the imposition of another' (Taylor-Jones 2018) – a transitory, exchange-like quality which we would seek to unpack further below.

It is worth noting that Ozu himself served in the Japanese Imperial Army from 1937 to 1939 – suggesting a possibility to read particular undercurrents of (post)colonial melancholy and/or consciousness in his work. It is these underlying aspects that hold further potential when reading his films in the context of cinematic resonances in Gomis' films. In Hogan's insightful reading of a 'different' kind of postcolonialism in Ozu's cinema, he rests his understanding of the term on an explication of 'cultural ethics' that sees manifestations of the postcolonial condition as fundamentally rooted within humanity itself.

> Colonialism did not begin with Britain and France, nor is it confined to a few paradigmatic cases. Colonialism is, in fact, vast in its historical and geographical scope. Postcolonial theory has, in this respect, greatly underestimated the extent of what might be called 'the postcolonial condition,' which is, in effect, a recurring subtype of the human condition.
>
> (Hogan 2010: 18)

This linkage in conditionalities between the postcolonial and the human is important because it speaks to a highly embodied and symbiotic representation of both that is not limited by historical or geographical specificity, but rather,

a commonality of mind-state and body-state observable in the way characters inhabit the cinematic spaces they are situated in. Taken more broadly, we might consider whether screen worlds themselves – of the kinds seen in drawing comparison between Ozu and Gomis' work – almost become symbiotic with each other. As filmmakers – separated both spatially and temporally – create these symbiotic connections when they make films that have an aesthetic influence underpinning them, does the relationship take on an almost living quality that feeds the contextual and physical association to the advantage of both?

In 1959, Ozu would 'remake' *I Was Born, But …* as *Good Morning*, transposing the film's rebellious brothers from the black-and-white, silent movie world of the 1930s into the bright, sunny full-colour optimism of Japan's post-war reconstruction. This temporal relocation would arguably trade in the societal 'indictment' present in *I Was Born, But …* for 'satirical diversion' (Richie 1959: 22) – the darker aspects of social commentary present in Ozu's 1930s version of the tale would now find themselves subsumed within a more overt attempt at filmic comedy – an element we will cover in further detail in the subsequent section.

In *Good Morning*, while the setting is still one of out-and-out domesticity, within it, new roles emerge for its characters – most notably, amongst women. Whereas before, women were limited to playing the position of full-time housewife, doting on a husband and sons, now, new expressions of femininity are offered. We see the modern, Western-influenced fashionista, but also the working woman. The irony however, as Ozu is keen to present us, is that the traditional housewives – still very much present in this 1950s vision of Japan – are formidable and empowered in their own way – swiftly dispensing with the nuisance of the travelling salesman who knocks on their doors looking to sell pencils. In *Good Morning*, old and new models of femininity are presented, not necessarily in opposition, but in tandem – it is left to the viewer to ponder how modernity has brought new ways of being to the social conformity of the suburbs.

Tone: Teasing the fabric of the everyday

Despite the thematic focus on existentialism and the human condition in both Ozu and Gomis' films, there is a shared comedic tone – comedy in itself acting as an emotional force that draws audiences closer together via shared understandings of what we find humorous. Humour is, however, rarely analysed in African cinema (Tcheuyap 2011: 46), for similar reasons to the aforementioned bracketed attention to beauty. In the context of everyday

hostilities and struggles, humour does not just have a cathartic effect, but can operate as a self-liberating tool (Tcheuyap 2011: 45). The comedic tone emerges often from the aesthetic approach. Observation is sometimes

FIGURE 10.7 *Yacine's point-of-view shot of the tourists on the bus where he is acting as the guide, in* Andalucia *© Sphere Films 2007. All rights reserved.*

FIGURE 10.8 Tokyo Story *directed by Yasujiro Ozu © Shochiku 1953. All rights reserved.*

turned in on itself in a form of humorous self-reflexivity. For example, in both *Tokyo Story* and *Andalucia*, we are presented with sequences on tour buses that are very funny (Figures 10.7 & 10.8). In the case of *Andalucia*, the tourist gaze of the passengers on the bus, visiting iconic Paris, is subverted through the use of verbal comedy. Yacine, who has been moving from one sporadic job to another, as part of his inability or unwillingness to settle in Paris, takes the microphone and makes the tourists repeat a nonsensical song – incomprehensible to them because they do not speak French.

At times, comedic moments are mediated by a helper, a secondary character that relieves various forms of everyday tension. Illustrative of this are both the character of Chérif in *L'Afrance* and Tabu in *Félicité.* Both are friends of the main character in each case, who finds certain comfort in the laughter prompted by their friends' actions. Tabu may be, in this sense, one of the most evident examples, in a no-dialogue scene where he makes both Félicité and her son laugh, as he unsuccessfully tries to fix their fridge. The simplicity of this ordinary household chore both contrasts with and accentuates the continuous everyday struggle faced by this single mother whose son has an amputated leg, as a result of a motorcycle accident, and the injustice of the health system.

The comedic performances are not always in direct dialogue with the characters, like the moment where Chérif, a Senegalese man based in Paris, is trying to explicitly flirt and dance with almost every woman at his friend's wedding. Chérif is not what Alexie Tcheuyap calls a 'puppet comedic archetype' (2011: 50). He is rather a character performing 'context-specific verbal and visual strategies to generate a comic effect' (Tcheuyap 2011: 57). For example, in *Andalucia*, when Moussa, Djibril and Yacine are working as extras in a rather racially problematic French film, Yacine (of Algerian heritage) ironically asks Djibril to bring him a Coke, shortly after a [French] film crew member had disrespectfully asked him to give him an instrument, as if he was his 'slave/help'. Having just complained about the humiliating costume design, Djibril and Yacine cannot help but laugh at the situation. This, like the various performances embodied by Yacine in his different jobs, constitutes 'spectacular music shows within the narrative themselves, dealing with comedy in a meta-fictional way' (Tcheuyap 2011: 61). In *I Was Born, But …,* such meta-fiction only works as comedy for some of the spectators within the fiction, when Yoshi's projected performance is the object of laughter by his boss and colleagues, which makes his sons, Ryoichi and Keiji, realize that he is being humiliated, due to class difference. The children themselves face a similar situation, bullied by their peers at school, treated as outsiders who have just moved to the outskirts of Tokyo. This sad reality is nonetheless approached humorously, when the children state, when asked if they liked

going to school: 'We like the way there, and returning home, not what is in the middle.'

Visual and verbal comedy, Tcheuyap suggests, can also 'be identified in the choices for the names of places, objects and characters' (2011: 58). It is worth nuancing this statement here in that within the broader characterization of comedic material, it is the sharper, more bittersweet tones of irony that often seem to surface more readily within both Ozu and Gomis' films. The comedy associated with naming is already evident in the aforementioned title of Gomis' first feature length film, *L'Afrance*. In *Félicité*, both Félicité and Tabu are not random names, but carefully orchestrated to identify the characters. Félicité, which translates into Felicity/Happiness, is a strong woman who is first heard when singing at a bar. Throughout the film, she engages in a continuous struggle, in order to collect the necessary funds for her son's operation. A range of sonic timespaces, often in dreams, provide the only form of *félicité* that seems possible. In contrast, her friend Tabu has no filters. He expresses himself loudly, asserting his identity, 'I am Tabu, Tabu Fatou', in the midst of diverse bodies in the overwhelming capital of Congo, Kinshasa.

It is in the closing moments of what has come to be Ozu's most famous film, *Tokyo Story*, that we are offered perhaps the essence of this humour-inflected perseverance in the face of life's adversities and unfairness. Amidst the subdued melancholy that suffuses the household following the death and funeral of the family matriarch Tomi, daughter Kyoko asks the pointed question: 'Isn't life disappointing?' Her sister-in-law Noriko replies with a smile, 'Yes, it is, isn't it?' Richie observes this distinct tonality as a 'resigned sadness, a calm and knowing serenity which prevails despite the uncertainty of life and the things of this world' and attributes it to the Japanese notion of *mono no aware* or 'sympathetic sadness' (Richie 1963: 24). For Richie, there is an element of distance to this tonality – a sense of detached uninvolved-ness – but we would contend that the charm of Ozu's cinema is that it leaves this open to interpretation. There is, even, the scope to read Noriko's statement as a subtle nod to the quasi-colonial post-war state of Japan, defeated in battle and now undergoing an occupation of sorts by the triumphant United States. For Noriko, the loss is more than symbolic – her soldier husband lost his life in the war and she is left behind as the grieving widow. Are Ozu's characters really as calm and serene as they initially appear, or is there something barely repressed hidden beneath?

Perhaps because of the constant, oppressive grind of everyday life, the films are not without their moments in which characters are invited, or tempted to let loose – typically aided by alcohol. In *Félicité*, the character with notorious alcohol consumption is Tabu, one of the frequent customers at the bar where Félicité sings. However, these moments of inebriation are often bittersweet – the

freedom and often farcical slapstick of the drunkard tempered by the nuisance they create for others around them. In these moments, they have 'broken' with the unspoken rules of society around them, and pay the harsh price for doing so – the regret is felt on behalf of us, the viewer, as much as it is by the characters themselves. In other words, the verbal and visual humour contributes to the multi-sensorial depiction of psychological displacement, a bittersweetness even, experienced more prominently by the main character.

More broadly, it is often the moments of unpredictable roughness that break through most effectively amidst the broader texture of the films' narratives. We see this in the fights that break out between the children in *I Was Born, But …,* but also in the strange incident in *Andalucia* where Yacine attacks and robs a motorcyclist, only to instantly regret his decision and check his victim is unhurt. The effect of these moments is to lend a kind of randomness to proceedings, at once full of the childlike innocence of play, at others, a frightening primal atmosphere that hints at barely repressed emotion. In *Félicité*, we see the unfortunate effects of this balancing act taken to extremes, when a group of thieves stealing from market stalls are caught by a crowd of onlookers and beaten bloody. This 'rough justice' is a recurring theme throughout Gomis' films, and is presented in direct opposition to the quieter, often more foreboding 'justice' of civil society, in which the silent social contracts of society – as in Ozu's films – keep the city and its individuals moving along their respective tracks and life, albeit begrudgingly.

Above all, Ozu and Gomis' films remain suffused by the fabric of the everyday, the mundane, the ordinary (Figures 10.9 & 10.10) – something Geist picks out

FIGURE 10.9 I Was Born But … *directed by Yasujiro Ozu* © *Shochiku 1932. All rights reserved.*

FIGURE 10.10 Good Morning *directed by Yasujiro Ozu © Shochiku 1959. All rights reserved.*

in Ozu's specialization in the *shomin-geki* (commoner) genre that was popular in Japan's postwar period, with a particular emphasis on family narratives (Geist 1983: 234). Williams emphasizes the 'presentness' in *Félicité*, since the film is 'firmly committed to the material present and allows the everyday to come into aesthetic view in both human and non-human ways' (Williams 2019: 270).

We might consider, in bringing this section on tone to an end, whether the humdrum of the everyday offers any hope of salvation for the protagonists of the two directors' films. Here, we might look to Geist's interpretation of Schrader and Richie's reading of Ozu, and in particular the emphasis on Zen Buddhism's influence on both the aesthetic and tone of his films. Famously, Ozu's grave would bear as an epitaph the Japanese character 'mu' (emptiness/nothingness), and Geist notes, 'For the traditional Japanese artist, emptiness and silence are positive elements in a composition; he composes as much with emptiness and silence as with form or sound' (Geist 1983: 234). In Ozu's films (and those of Gomis too) pauses and silences are incredibly frequent, with dialogue often falling into the gaps in-between these non-spaces, as discussed earlier in relation to Ozu's mode of 'waiting, listening'. In a key scene in *Félicité*, the title character visits a rich man's house to beg for money for her son's operation, and there is a striking juxtaposition between her standing silently in front of him, before eventually being dragged away, kicking

and screaming. The tension between the extremes of stoic silence and violent outburst makes each in their own right all the more impactful.

Crucially, these silences possess a form of their own, whether that be in the enforced silence of the two brothers in *Good Morning* – an act of rebellion against their parents – or the thoughtful, pensive silence of Noriko in *Tokyo Story* as she returns home by train following her mother-in-law's death. In the latter case, this silence opens up possibilities, as viewers are left to consider whether the film's heroine will ever break free from the shackles she has confined herself to – unwilling to desecrate the memory of her dead husband by 'moving on' in her life and finding a new partner. For Gomis, silence offers a very literal 'escape' in the final act of *Andalucia*, where protagonist Yacine steps out into a literal 'void', his body levitating soundlessly into the air as he walks across a backdrop of empty, parched landscape.

This quasi-'enlightenment' seems to offer a kind of imaginative freedom in comparison to his continued hardships throughout the film, but is tempered by its highly fantastical nature.

Conclusion

Nornes writes of how a mid-1990s re-evaluation of Ozu would be instrumental in bolstering the Japanese director towards the hallowed status he now holds, aided by both a 'publishing spree' of books about Ozu, but also a stream of cinematic 'homages' from European directors such as Wim Wenders and Jim Jarmusch (Nornes 2007: 78). With Nornes' comments in mind, we might ask to what degree Gomis' own influences from Ozu can be seen as homage, or as something more? In answering this, and drawing on our analysis above, we would suggest that it is the clear universality in the applicability of Ozu's aesthetics, themes and tonality that allows what Richie identified as his 'syntax' to be both specific, and wide-ranging in nature. Moreover, beneath the overt cinematic surface, deeper resonances ensure that this universality is not merely visual or even textural in nature, but also something to be felt on an emotional level. It is an act of 'radical decentering', which fosters an affective experience of beauty (Scarry 2001). In this sense, universality becomes a kind of pan-humanity; Gomis' filmic continuation of Ozu's imagery, aesthetic and tone as born in the minds and hearts of his characters, but also in his own appreciation of the Japanese director's films from a young age. Thus, Ozu's style is not merely 'applied' to Gomis' films, but wholly and fully embraced and embodied. It is because of this that Gomis' cinema – clearly – does not feel like a quintessential vision of Japan merely transplanted and mapped onto France or Africa. Rather, it speaks to an 'us' that exists beneath the

surface of these nations and locations, interior and exterior space melding into one – all in aid of fostering our link, as viewers, with the characters on screen before us.

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