TOWARDS AN AESTHETIC OF THE MIGRANT SELF — THE FILM *LE CLANDESTIN* BY JOSÉ ZEKA LAPLAINE

**Abstract:**
The representation of migrant arrivals in Europe is at the centre of this investigation of Zeka Laplaïne’s short film *Le Clandestin* (1996). Placing the short film in the context of the African cinematographic traditions of earlier, more conventional, migrant narratives, the essay shows that the associative structure and the postmodern use of irony and magical realism in this short film question both our sense of familiarity and the promise of effortless transcultural communication.

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Most films (cinema and television productions) dealing with African migration, especially migration to Europe, are produced and realized by European film and broadcasting companies. They reflect a specific attitude towards individuals and their situation and towards the issue of foreign presence on European soil. The portrayal and production of the African migrant in European media represents a complex field of politically, socially, racially, and aesthetically relevant influences that would need to be analysed specifically. Awareness of these issues has spread beyond the academic field: everybody is more or less familiar with the images of African migrants, with the unease, the exaggerations, humiliations, and transformations taking place in the production of these images, and has learned to view against the grain and sometimes see behind the obvious. Another concern underlies the present essay: are there other ways of expressing and showing the arrival of...
African migrants in Europe? Who is showing us the migrant? How is s/he being shown? What does this tell us? What does this type of framing do to him/her, and to us, the audience? Is there another way of approaching this situation apart from talking about the migrant other or as the migrant other? The film *Le Clandestin* by José Zéka Laplaine (1996)\(^1\) does not give a solution to the problem of representation but focuses on the hidden ‘how’ of the representational performance.

There are various films made by African filmmakers about Africans arriving and living in Europe. The very first, *Afrique sur Seine*, is a documentary shot in Paris; the fiction film *La Noire de*... is set in Senegal and France; *Les Bicots nègres vos voisins* and *Lumière noire*, both by Abid Med Hondo, focus on black labour in France in the 1970s and 1990s respectively; *Back Home Again* turns out to be a rare comedy on this topic; the docudrama *Waalo Fendo* is set in Switzerland; *Clando* takes place in Cameroon and Germany; one of the most famous Senegalese productions, *Touki Bouki* by Djibril Diop Mambety, addresses migration; so do all films by Abderrahmane Sissako, especially *Rostov Luanda* and *Octobre*, to name but a few.\(^2\) Narrating migration to Europe can be regarded as a topos in African filmmaking. The above-mentioned films present a variety of styles and modes; they refer to different cinematic movements and historical periods. This is also true of the often stereotypical images of Africa presented in colonial films produced between 1900 and 1930. The latter aimed at presenting the many facets and faces of humankind, and played a crucial role in representing Europe in Africa and Africans to a Western audience in the colonial period.

People were filmed in the colonies, and the films got transported to Europe to be shown; African people made the journey (whether by force or in the hope

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1. José Zéka Laplaine, dir. *Le Clandestin* (Bakia Films/Prole Films, 1996, 35mm, 15 min.).