

# AFTERLIVES OF NAZI PROPAGANDA

■ *André Cauvin and Bwana Kitoko*<sup>1</sup>

- **Matthew G. Stanard** -

The year 2010 marked fifty years of independence for the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and in Belgium it was occasioned by celebrations, reflections, and commemorations that included the showing of the 1955 film *Bwana Kitoko* by filmmaker André Cauvin on the Flemish channel VRT. Filmed during the last decade of Belgian imperialist rule in central Africa, *Bwana Kitoko* is a pro-colonial propaganda documentary explicitly predicated on the desirability of white (superior) European rule over black (inferior) Africans, a view long outdated by 2010. It is hard to imagine a comparable public showing of a pro-Nazi propaganda film in Germany, for instance Leni Riefenstahl's infamous *Triumph of the Will*, because showing Nazi propaganda is illegal in that country. But one might imagine the outrage that would accompany a network television broadcast in the United States of, say, W. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915). As Belgian historian and film expert Guido Convents described this rebroadcast of *Bwana Kitoko*, "The avalanche of images that VRT showed in May and June 2010 as part of the fiftieth anniversary of the independence of Congo was peppered with colonial nostalgia and culture. That on June 30 in primetime the inferior colonial documentary and propaganda film *Bwana Kitoko* by Belgian André Cauvin was shown, is incomprehensible."<sup>2</sup> How could an overtly pro-colonial film supporting a racist worldview be screened on Belgian television in the twenty-first century? To answer this question and address related issues it raises, this essay takes as its subject the creation, reception, and afterlife of Cauvin's full-length motion picture *Bwana Kitoko* (Handsome master, 1955), which was the most significant colonialist film to emerge from the history of Belgian involvement in central Africa.

## I. Introduction

Cauvin's propaganda documentary about young King Baudouin's 1955 tour of the Congo is the most prominent among hundreds of Belgian colonialist films, yet it remains largely unknown today, even to many specialists in propaganda or cinema. This article applies different film theory and examines a number of original, little-used sources to unpack Cauvin's film. Existing biographical sketches of Cauvin and different analyses of *Bwana Kitoko* rely heavily on primary sources such as newspapers and a general visual analysis of his famous film. The present analysis goes further. In addition to contemporary accounts such as newspapers and specialized film publications, this article makes extensive use of the Archives André Cauvin (formerly the *fonds privé d'André Cauvin*), which in 2004 were handed over to the Centre d'Étude Guerre et Société in Brussels.<sup>3</sup> The analysis also makes use of the *Archief Georges Theunis* at the AGR, the AGR's André Cauvin photography archive, interviews with the filmmaker, and the director's World War II memoir, *La Liaison dangereuse*.<sup>4</sup>

This article takes seriously Marc Ferro's point that films are both agents of history and sources to understand the past.<sup>5</sup> Historians for long lamented the dearth of historical context and evidence in film studies, and film scholars have regretted the lack of seriousness with which historians have taken *le sep-*

*tième art*.<sup>6</sup> As *Film & History* editor John E. O'Connor once put it, "Historians as a group have never paid appropriate attention to film."<sup>7</sup> Today, few historians would deny film is a cultural phenomenon worthy of historical analysis. What follows hews to Marc Ferro's suggestion to use different approaches to understanding film and the relationship between cinema, society, history, and culture.<sup>8</sup> At moments, this article follows auteur theory: both Riefenstahl and Cauvin were the authors of their respective films, even if state funding and guidance set parameters for both productions. At other points the article follows formalist theory to underline the significance of each director's technical, compositional, and editing decisions. On the whole, this article wedds historical and film studies by examining motion pictures not merely as artistic creations but also as productions with purposes, differing receptions, and historical effects.<sup>9</sup> It also innovates in its transnational approach. Like history writing, film studies have been constrained by a nation-state framework, including scholarship on cinema in Nazi Germany.<sup>10</sup> By tracing techniques, ideas, and themes as they crossed not only temporal divisions like 1945 but also national boundaries, this article breaks from nation-centric limitations that obtain in both history and film studies.

The analysis of film, archives, and other primary sources that follows makes clear that Cauvin borrowed techniques and themes from Nazi propagandist Leni Riefenstahl and her film *Triumph of*

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2. GUIDO CONVENTS, "VRT en 50 jaar Congo: de wansmaak voorbij", *DeWereldMorgen.be*, 6 July 2010, < <http://www.dewereldmorgen.be/artikels/2010/07/06/vrt-en-50-jaar-congo-de-wansmaak-voorbij> >, consulted on 26 August 2021.

3. Best known by its French-Dutch acronym CegeSoma, now part of the state Archives générales du Royaume.

4. For the Photography Collection of André Cauvin, CEGESOMA, < <https://www.cegesoma.be/en/photography-collection-andr%C3%A9-cauvin> >, consulted on 23 September 2024.

5. MARC FERRO, *Cinema and History*, trans. Naomi Greene, Detroit, 1988.

6. JOHN E. O'CONNOR, "History in Images/Images in History: Reflections on the Importance of Film and Television Study for an Understanding of the Past", *American Historical Review* 53, 1988, 1200-1209; DAVID WELCH & ROEL VANDE WINKEL, "Introduction", in DAVID WELCH & ROEL VANDE WINKEL (eds.), *Cinema and the Swastika: The International Expansion of Third Reich Cinema*, Houndsmill, Basingstoke, 2007, 1-5.

7. JOHN E. O'CONNOR, review of Marc Ferro, *Cinema and History in Film Quarterly* 45, no. 1, 1991, 43.

8. MARC FERRO, *Cinema and History*.

9. MARC FERRO, *Cinema and History*.

10. DAVID WELCH & ROEL VANDE WINKEL, "Introduction", 3; ERNEST K. BRAMSTED, *Goebbels and National Socialist Propaganda 1925-1945*, [East Lansing, Michigan], 1965, 67.

the Will, leading *Bwana Kitoko* to closely resemble Riefenstahl's infamous film in significant ways. The inspiration Cauvin drew from this towering film of Nazi propaganda has not gone unremarked upon before. As one Belgian who saw the film in 2010 put it, "Cauvin clearly had been inspired by his controversial German colleague Leni Riefenstahl, who played a crucial role in her friend Adolf Hitler's propaganda machine."<sup>11</sup> The persistence of Nazi imagery in Cauvin's film, even if it was drawn into his production subconsciously, illustrates the connection Aimé Césaire and Hannah Arendt made between European overseas conquests and totalitarianism in Europe.<sup>12</sup> In the case of Cauvin's embrace of Nazi propaganda techniques, Césaire's and Arendt's "boomerang" effect continued even after *Stunde Null* of May 1945.<sup>13</sup>

The long afterlife of *Bwana Kitoko* beyond Congo's 1960 independence raises questions about differing memories of Nazi Germany and the Belgian colonial empire in central Africa. After the experience of World War II, the projection of *Triumph des Willens* elicits unease as the viewer struggles with the experience of taking in an impressive film that was created in the service of evil.<sup>14</sup> The picture is banned for public screening in Germany, and very few people have seen the entire film; if they've been exposed to any of it, usually it is of clips incorporated into documentary film or television productions. Belgians also showed clips or images from *Bwana Kitoko*, and for decades, and it has been rebroadcast in its entirety several times since 1960. The positive responses to *Bwana Kitoko* when it first appeared demonstrate how respectable empire remained into the 1950s. The approval of both film and director into the twenty-first century suggests that Belgians viewed their African empire favorably for many decades after their "loss" of the colony in 1960.

By explaining the film, its production, its reception in Belgium, and its life following Congo's independence, this article also introduces readers to André Cauvin, much of whose long life was dedicated to making films designed to buttress Belgian colonialism in Africa. Few specialists know Cauvin even though he was *un figure de proue* in the realm of Belgian pro-colonial films, of which hundreds were produced before 1960. This article first surveys Cauvin's life and films and unveils surprising parallels with his contemporary, German director Leni Riefenstahl. The essay then turns to *Bwana Kitoko* itself: its production, content, imagery, and reception. It then explores its history following Belgium's loss of its colony in 1960. In order to develop these points, the article begins by situating Cauvin's film in its historical context by surveying the nature of Belgian colonialism in Africa and the role of propaganda in it.

## II. Belgian overseas empire and colonialist propaganda

For eighty-plus years, Belgium was involved directly or indirectly in ruling what is today the DRC. King Leopold II spearheaded a colonialist initiative in central Africa beginning in the 1870s, and he managed to secure recognition in Europe and the U.S. of his authority over the Congo River basin by 1885. The king baptized this overseas possession the État Indépendant du Congo, or Congo Free State (CFS). The CFS was a state that Leopold II himself created, and it remained juridically and politically distinct from his other kingdom, Belgium. One condition that the Belgian parliament placed on its recognition of Leopold II as *roi-souverain* over the CFS in 1885 was that the colony remain separate from Belgium.

11. LEO BONTE, "Het leven zoals het niet was: Congo", *De Standaard*, 30 June 2010, 36.

12. AIMÉ CÉSAIRE, *Discourse on Colonialism*, New York, 2000; RICHARD H. KING & DAN STONE (eds.), *Hannah Arendt and the Uses of History: Imperialism, Nationalism, Race and Genocide*, New York, 2007.

13. On *Stunde null*, TONY JUDT, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945*, New York, 2005, 4; IAN BURUMA, *Year Zero: A History of 1945*, New York, 2013, 242.

14. MARY DEVEREAUX, "Beauty and Evil: The Case of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*", in JERROLD LEVINSON (ed.), *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*, Cambridge, 1998, 227-256.

The CFS developed as a sort of international endeavor of Leopold's that came to involve Belgium and Belgians more and more over time. The king recruited colonial functionaries and military officers from across Europe and African foot soldiers from Zanzibar and West Africa for the colony's military, called the Force publique; with time, its officers came mostly from Belgium and its soldiers from the Congo. Following terrible abuses, public scandal, resistance on the ground, and a years-long campaign by Britons and others to end Leopoldian rule, an agreement was reached by which the king ceded the colony to Belgium in 1908. From 1908 to 1960, Belgium ruled the king's erstwhile African domain as a state colony, called the Belgian Congo. Congolese nationalists wrested control of their country from Belgium and earned their independence in 1960.<sup>15</sup>

Considering the shaky origins of Belgium's colonial endeavor, it might come as no surprise that after 1908, Belgian authorities employed propaganda as a tool to reinforce their control over the Congo. The Ministry of Colonies, the Catholic Church, colonial veterans, and colonial enterprises created films, monuments, publications, museums, and colonial expositions, including so-called human zoos, to engage the Belgian population in the colonial enterprise.<sup>16</sup> Belgians touted achievements in central Africa to boost their legitimacy as colonial rulers in order to forestall foreign meddling in their giant colonial domain, be it by the British after the 1908 turnover or by irredentist Germany after 1919: on the

heels of the abuses of the Leopoldian era, Britain did not even recognize the Congo as *Belgian* until 1913; after the post-war peace settlement handed Belgium the former German territories of Ruanda-Urundi as a Class B Mandate under the League of Nations, Weimar Germany was strident in its protests. After World War II, Belgians trumpeted their successes to solidify their hold on the Congo and to stave off foreign meddling, for instance by the United States or the United Nations.<sup>17</sup> Propaganda continued for decades, reaching its apogee in the 1950s, by which time technological advances had made movies, publications, and photos much cheaper to produce.<sup>18</sup> André Cauvin was not the only filmmaker involved. One pioneer was Ernest Genval, who made films for and about colonial enterprises throughout the interwar era. Gérard De Boe created dozens of motion pictures in the Congo over a two-decade career spanning from the 1930s to the 1950s.<sup>19</sup> In sum, film emerged as a tool of pro-colonial propaganda during the Leopoldian era and continued to form a major element of propaganda supporting Belgian control in central Africa right down to 1960.<sup>20</sup>

### III. André Cauvin

André Cauvin became a prominent Belgian film director who produced work out of central Africa with the goal of buttressing his country's control there. To understand the significance of his 1955 film *Bwana Kitoko*, it is important to understand Cauvin's life and career because both affected

15. For an overview, GUY VANTHEMSCHE, "The Belgian Colonial Empire (1885/1908-1960)", in M. GEHLER & R. ROLLINGER (eds.), *Imperien und Reiche in der Weltgeschichte: Epochenübergreifende und globalhistorische Vergleiche*, vol. 2, Wiesbaden, 2014, 971-997. On Congo's independence, MATTHEW G. STANARD, "Après nous, le déluge: Belgium, Decolonization, and the Congo", in MARTIN THOMAS & ANDREW THOMPSON (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Ends of Empire*, Oxford, 2018, 144-161.

16. LUC VINTS, *Kongo made in Belgium: beeld van een kolonie in film en propaganda*, Leuven, 1984; MATTHEW G. STANARD, *Selling the Congo: A History of European Pro-Empire Propaganda and the Making of Belgian Imperialism*, Lincoln, Nebraska, 2011.

17. MATTHEW G. STANARD, "'Boom! Goes the Congo': The Rhetoric of Control and Belgium's Late Colonial State", in MARTIN THOMAS & RICHARD TOYE (eds.), *Rhetorics of Empire: Imperial Discourse and the Language of Colonial Conflict after 1900*, Manchester, 2017, 121-141.

18. ANNE CORNET & FRANÇOISE GILLET, *Congo Belgique 1955-1965: Entre propagande et réalité*, Brussels, 2010; BAMBI CEUPPENS, DAVID VAN REYBROUCK & VINCENT VIAENE (eds.), *Congo in België: Koloniale cultuur in de metropool*, Leuven, 2009.

19. FRANCIS RAMIREZ & CHRISTIAN ROLOT, *Histoire du Cinéma Colonial au Zaïre au Rwanda et au Burundi*, Tervuren, 1985.

20. PATRICIA VAN SCHUYLENBERGH & MATHIEU ZANA AZIZA ETAMBALA, eds., *Patrimoine d'Afrique centrale. Archives Films: Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, 1912-1960*, Tervuren, 2010; GUIDO CONVENTS, *Préhistoire du cinéma en Afrique 1897-1918: A la recherche des images oubliées*, Brussels, 1986; Id., *L'Afrique? Quel cinéma! Un siècle de propagande coloniale et de films africains*, trans. WUNGA LOMAMI ONADIKONDO, Antwerp, 2003; FRANCIS RAMIREZ & CHRISTIAN ROLOT, *Histoire du Cinéma Colonial*.

the film's production, distribution, and reception. The future filmmaker was born in 1907 into a bourgeois family in Brussels.<sup>21</sup> He was evacuated to England as a child during World War I where he learned English and gained an affinity for the country. Returning to Brussels in 1919, Cauvin continued his education and became a lawyer, then took up amateur filmmaking. His directing quickly made an impression: one of his first short films, about the 1935 Brussels World's Fair, won an award the same year it appeared. He then won the *coupe* in the category *films documentaires 16 m/m* at the 1937 Exposition Cinématographique de Côme.<sup>22</sup> The very next year, Cauvin turned professional director and photographer, with success. His film *Congo, terre d'eaux vives* (1939) was chosen to be shown at both the Exposition internationale de l'eau in Liège and the 1939-40 New York World's Fair, the latter the final universal exposition before the caesura of World War II.<sup>23</sup>

World War II led Cauvin to become more involved in colonial filmmaking. After the outbreak of fighting in Europe in 1939, Cauvin entered into service for his country and joined the Resistance in September 1940—importantly, this was not (according to him) out of ideological opposition to fascism but because he simply rejected the foreign occupation of Belgium.<sup>24</sup> His work for the reconnaissance group *le service Luc-Marc*, for which the U.S. was to later award him a US Medal of Freedom, was cut short by a threatened arrest by the Gestapo.<sup>25</sup> He fled Belgium in January 1942 and escaped to

England via France, Spain, and Portugal, at one point even boarding a German airplane to make his escape.<sup>26</sup> The Belgian government-in-exile engaged him to make a film for the Allies about the Congo's contribution to the war, which resulted in the simply-titled *Congo* (1944). The Belgian filmmaker and *résistant* traveled to the U.S. to premiere his film at the White House for Franklin Roosevelt, an evening that Cauvin later recalled as a "historic" night for him.<sup>27</sup> He made other wartime presentations in the U.S. including screening *Congo* at the Office of War Information and U.S. State Department, speaking before a crowd of some 3,500 at the National Geographic Society, and exhibiting his photographs from the Congo in different U.S. cities.<sup>28</sup>

Having returned to Belgium after the *Libération*, Cauvin continued collaborating with the Belgian government as it ramped up its pro-colonial propaganda in an era that some have called "a second colonisation of Africa," but one that was also a time of growing anti-colonialist activity.<sup>29</sup> His success as a colonialist filmmaker continued. In 1949, his film *L'Equateur aux cent visages* (1948) won the Venice film festival's Best Foreign Documentary, and his picture *Bongolo* (1952) was chosen as the Belgian entry for the 1953 Cannes film festival; the same honor was accorded to *Bwana Kitoko* for the 1956 Cannes event.<sup>30</sup> In all, Cauvin directed more than two dozen films and shorts. His extensive travels exposed him to all kinds of international influences and led to friendships with prominent artists including writer Paul Bowles, film pioneer Georges

21. FLORENCE GILLET, "Cauvin (André)", *Biographical Dictionary of Overseas Belgians*, [Brussels], 2015, < [https://www.kaowarsom.be/en/notices\\_cauvin\\_andre](https://www.kaowarsom.be/en/notices_cauvin_andre) >, consulted on 23 September 2024.

22. "Le concours du meilleur film d'amateur", *La Nation Belge*, 25 October 1935, 10.

23. GUIDO CONVENTS, *L'Afrique ?*, 59-60.

24. FLORENCE GILLET, "Cauvin (André)".

25. PETER VERSTRAETEN, *The US Medal of Freedom Awarded to Belgians for Services during World War II*, n.p., 2007, 147, 158.

26. ANDRÉ CAUVIN, *La Liaison dangereuse*, Brussels, 1988; PETER VERSTRAETEN, *US Medal of Freedom*, 158.

27. FRANCIS RAMIREZ & CHRISTIAN ROLOT, *Histoire du Cinéma Colonial*, 23; FLORENCE GILLET, "La 'mission' Cauvin. La propagande coloniale du gouvernement belge aux États-Unis pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale", *Cahiers d'Histoire du Temps présent*, no. 15, 2005, 357-383; MATTHEW G. STANARD, "'Boom!'", 130. Quote "historic" from Cauvin letter (never sent), 18 March 1944, Archives générales du Royaume 2, dépôt Joseph Cuvelier, *André Cauvin*, AA1940, liasse 910. The archives *André Cauvin* at the Archives générales du Royaume 2, dépôt Joseph Cuvelier, AA1940, hereafter *AGR2 AA1940*.

28. Letter from Taylor M. Mills (Office of War Information), 22 August 1944, *AGR2 AA1940*, liasse 1104; Cauvin letter (never sent), 18 March 1944, *AGR2 AA1940*, liasse 910.

29. MICHAEL CROWDER, "The Second World War: Prelude to Decolonisation in Africa", in MICHAEL CROWDER (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Africa. Volume 8, from c. 1940 to c. 1975*, Cambridge, 1984, 28.

30. *AGR2 AA1940*, liasse 1116.

Méliès, artist Georges Hugnet, sculptor Ossip Zadkine, and Walt Disney.<sup>31</sup> Between the making of *Nos soldats d'Afrique* (1939), *Congo, terre d'eaux vives*, *Congo* in 1944, *L'Equateur aux cent visages*, *Bongolo*, and *Bwana Kitoko*, Cauvin probably traveled across and saw more of the Belgian colony than any of his contemporaries, including colonial administrators.<sup>32</sup> Nonetheless, with 1960 and the arrival of Congolese independence, Cauvin put Africa behind him. He largely abandoned photography and filmmaking and returned to his law practice, then dedicated his later years to writing. He passed away in Belgium in 2004 at age 97.

In many ways, Cauvin's life and career paralleled that of another great film propagandist, Leni Riefenstahl, from whose film *Triumph des Willens* Cauvin appears to have drawn inspiration.<sup>33</sup> He and Riefenstahl were almost exact contemporaries. She was born into the working-class Berlin neighborhood of Wedding in 1902, just five years before Cauvin's birth, and she died in 2003 at the age of 101, preceding Cauvin in death by a mere seven months. Both Riefenstahl and Cauvin traveled widely, networked internationally, and earned numerous national and international film prizes, yet remained loyal to their home countries. Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens* won the Gold Medal at the 1935 Venice film festival for Best Foreign Documentary and the Grand Prix at the 1937 Paris exposition; echoing these wins, Cauvin's *L'Equateur aux cent visages* also garnered the Gold Medal at the Venice film festival, in 1949.

Both directors were independent spirits but also patriots who received substantial government backing for their documentary film projects—something not unusual considering that in Europe, at least, “government sponsors have been critically important to documentary filmmaking.”<sup>34</sup> Riefenstahl seized upon the opportunities made available to her by the Nazi regime in the 1930s: in addition to *Triumph* she made *Olympia* (1938) about the 1936 Berlin Olympics. In the end, Riefenstahl became one of Nazism's greatest propagandists, despite her later protests to the contrary.<sup>35</sup> Although she claimed that Hitler compelled her to create *Triumph*, in fact she admired him and chose to continue working for the National Socialist regime.<sup>36</sup> Thus did she take on the work of making a film centered on the 1934 Nazi Party Congress, financed by the Nazi Party. Similar to Riefenstahl's denial of allegiance to the ideology of Nazism, Cauvin disclaimed any particular attraction to the colonial idea. Cauvin's World War II memoir and his extensive correspondence and film notes reveal no ideological bent or special attraction to the colonial idea, suggesting instead an ambitious and nationalistic Belgian filmmaker eager to secure backing for his next film, whatever its subject.<sup>37</sup> He jumped at the opportunity to make the colonialist film *Congo* for the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs not because of any professed colonialist views, but “above all” because he wanted to get back to filmmaking but “was being pursued on Belgian territory by the Gestapo and therefore could not dream of

31. ERIK DE GROEF, “André Cauvin. Film pionier” [internal BRT document], 21 August 1992, in “Bwana Kitoko (Koninklijke Reis)”, Identifier BE/942855/1927/3216, *Collectie filmdossiers Katholieke Filmliga/Filmmagie*, source BE/942855/1927, < <http://abs.lias.be/Query/detail.aspx?ID=886364> >, < [http://depot.lias.be/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps\\_pid=IE7408948](http://depot.lias.be/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE7408948) >, consulted on 7 January 2022, 1. Cauvin underlined his friendship with Walt Disney in a late-life interview: “Interviews d'André Cauvin 2001-2003”, 35 (Archives CegeSoma, *archives André Cauvin*, AB2376).

32. HOWARD POLLACK, *The Ballad of John Latouche: An American Lyricist's Life and Work*, New York, 2017, 172; see also the itinerary in ANDRÉ CAUVIN, *Bwana Kitoko: De reis van Z.M. Koning Boudewijn in Belgisch Congo en Ruanda-Urundi*, Brussels/Amsterdam, 1956, 106.

33. On Riefenstahl, in addition to literature referenced below, see also RAY MÜLLER'S *The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl* (released 1993), New York, 1998.

34. PATRICIA AUFDERHEIDE, *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, 2007, 18.

35. SUSAN SONTAG, “Fascinating Fascism”, in *Under the Sign of Saturn*, New York, 1980, 73-105.

36. MARY DEVEREAUX, “Beauty and Evil”, 237.

37. As one biographer framed his views on politics, Nazism, and joining the Resistance in Belgium, “*S'il accepte de s'engager, c'est davantage par refus de l'occupation allemande que par idéologie antinazie, réagissant avant tout contre un état de fait qui lui est insupportable: la présence d'une autorité étrangère sur le territoire national.*” FLORENCE GILLET, “Cauvin (André)”.



a return to the country.”<sup>38</sup> Cauvin, like Riefenstahl, worked to advance his home country’s interests.<sup>39</sup> *Bwana Kitoko* is but one film among several that Cauvin created to demonstrate the benefits of Belgian colonial rule for which he received support, funding, and direction from the government and colonial parastatal groups.<sup>40</sup>

One can extend the parallels between the directors further. Both were photographers fascinated by Africa and Africans. Cauvin’s photobooks about the Congo highlighted individual African faces and bodies without naming his subjects.<sup>41</sup> Whereas after 1960 and Congolese independence Cauvin put Africa behind him, after 1945 and the caesura of Germany’s defeat, Riefenstahl went the other way, developing a “passion to conquer Africa.” She became “Africa crazy.”<sup>42</sup> With her protectors dead as of 1945, her life turned on a dime. She had a breakdown and moved into denial mode. Her directing career ended, with the exception of her finishing *Tiefeland* (1954), a film begun before the war that she finished years later. The very year after Cauvin finished *Bwana Kitoko*, Riefenstahl arrived to sub-Saharan Africa for the first time, having been inspired by Ernest Hemingway’s *The Green Hills of Africa* (1935). She made some half dozen trips to Africa in all, and her enchantment with African bodies and faces is evident in a series of photography books including *The Last of the Nuba* (*Die Nuba*, 1973), *People of Kau* (*Die Nuba von Kau*, 1976), and *Vanishing Africa* (*Mein Afrika*, 1982). Like Cauvin, who was entranced by the African form and whose photobooks on the Congo highlighted African bodies and faces, Riefenstahl was captivated by the

beauty of the human form, in particular African ones.<sup>43</sup> Similar to Cauvin’s work, Riefenstahl’s books strip her African subjects of their individuality by leaving them anonymous, unnamed.

Besides gender and nationality, the biographies of Cauvin and Riefenstahl diverge in two significant ways. First, while Riefenstahl is infamous, Cauvin is little known. Second, although both made films in support of oppressive, racist regimes, Riefenstahl died a beleaguered and controversial figure whereas Cauvin died well-considered despite his colonialist filmmaking and the fact that he drew inspiration from a notorious Nazi propaganda film. The divergent fates of the two directors and their greatest productions suggests there is truth in the adage attributed to Winston Churchill that history is written by the victors. With Nazism defeated and dismissed after 1945, Riefenstahl’s propaganda documentary became anathema. Belgium, by contrast, was on the winning side of the war, and many viewed its control over Congo as legitimate. Even after 1960, as we shall see, the idea of colonialism remained broadly accepted in Belgium and elsewhere, lending Cauvin and *Bwana Kitoko* a legitimacy never shared by the film that inspired it.

#### IV. Triumph des Willens and André Cauvin

Evidence from the 1930s suggests that André Cauvin was impressed by Riefenstahl’s work as both actor and director and that he saw *Triumph des Willens* early on. This is crucial to understand because Cauvin was the true author of his 1955

38. FLORENCE GILLET, “André Cauvin: Gros Plan sur Deux Décennies de Carrière cinématographique en Afrique centrale”, in PATRICIA VAN SCHUYLENBERGH & MATHIEU ZANA AZIZA ETAMBALA (eds.), *Patrimoine d’Afrique Centrale. Archives Films: Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, 1912-1960*, Tervuren, 2010, 134.

39. Cauvin to Roland Detry (Ministry of Colonies), 30 April 1955, AGR2 AA1940, liasse 345.

40. “Note pour Monsieur Cauvin”, no. 1346, 27 December 1943 (Archives générales du Royaume, *Archief Georges Theunis* 522); Cauvin to the Procureur du Roi, 10 May 1951, AGR2 AA1940, liasse 180; Paul F. Merckx to Roland G. Detry, 8 March 1956, AGR2 AA1940, liasse 311; “Blanc et Noir, Pourquoi Pas? au cinéma”, 21 July 1939, 60; FLORENCE GILLET, “La ‘mission’ Cauvin”, 357-383; “Une Expédition cinématographique au Congo belge”, *Courrier d’Afrique*, 20 October 1950; FRANCIS RAMIREZ & CHRISTIAN ROLOT, *Histoire du Cinéma*, 40.

41. JOHN LATOUCHE, *Congo*, photos by ANDRÉ CAUVIN, New York, 1945; ANDRÉ CAUVIN, *Bwana kitoko: Un livre réalisé au cours du voyage du Roi des Belges au Congo et dans le Ruanda-Urundi*, Paris, 1956; ERIK DE GROEF, “André Cauvin. Film pionnier”, 3.

42. STEVEN BACH, *Leni: The Life and Work of Leni Riefenstahl*, New York, 2007, 248, 260.

43. ANDRÉ CAUVIN, “Le documentaire exotique”, *L’Étoile belge*, 11 April 1930, 5.

film, despite other factors setting parameters for his creation, such as the role of his producer, the Belgian state, which financed the film. Viewing *Bwana Kitoko* in comparison to *Triumph des Willens* strongly suggests Riefenstahl's 1935 Nazi propaganda film, anathema after 1945, lived on in altered form in Cauvin's 1955 production.

*Triumph des Willens* has been called "the most successful propaganda film ever made."<sup>44</sup> Nazi-era German films are not thought to have been great motion pictures except for *Triumph des Willens* and *Olympia*.<sup>45</sup> Many of *Triumph des Willens'* components were first essayed in Riefenstahl's *Sieg des Glaubens* (*Victory of Faith*, 1934) about the 1933 Nazi Party rally, making the latter a trial run.<sup>46</sup> Long after World War II, *Triumph des Willens* remained prohibited in Germany because of its propagandistic character. The picture centers on the sixth Nazi Party Congress, which took place in September 1934. It premiered on March 28, 1935, at the Ufa Palast am Zoo in Berlin, opened nationally on April 5, and was successful at home and abroad, winning several prizes. Still, the history of *Triumph des Willens'* reception outside Germany has yet to be written. Brett Bowles writes that it was "not distributed internationally for more than 2 years after its domestic premiere in March 1935," and that "its first foreign screening" took place "in July 1937 at the Paris World's Fair".<sup>47</sup> The film was alternately banned or made unavailable in some countries. Hitler prohibited its distribution in Britain and the Netherlands, the latter because, according to UFA, "their subsidiary

'Bioscoopbund' was governed by Jews."<sup>48</sup> Even if only released widely in Germany, it represented, "a major international artistic coup for the regime. Riefenstahl quickly became an internationally acclaimed director who was very soon pictured on the cover of *Newsweek* and would also make *Time* magazine in February 1936. Chaplin's 1940 parody of Hitler in *The Great Dictator* (Charles Chaplin, US, 1940) was supposedly influenced by a screening of *Triumph*. In wartime Britain, propagandists even used clips from Riefenstahl's film to ridicule the Nazis by reversing and speeding up the footage of goose-stepping storm troopers to the strains of 'The Lambeth Walk'."<sup>49</sup> Frank Capra's series *Why We Fight* (1942-45), produced by the US Department of War, was in many ways a response to *Triumph des Willens*, and the series included clips taken from it.

Despite Bowles's statement that it was not for two years after its premiere that *Triumph des Willens* was distributed abroad, public screenings of Riefenstahl's film were held in Belgium in October 1936, one and a half years after its Berlin premiere. To date, there has been no explanation of how *Triumph des Willens* was first shown in Belgium and how it was received.<sup>50</sup> Riefenstahl was a known entity because numerous reviews of her work had appeared in the Belgian press, for instance of *Sieg des Glaubens*. *Triumph des Willens* was shown with *La Lumière bleue* (*Das blaue Licht*) at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels on October 22, 1936; again that month at the Belgian Filmuniversiteit *Herman van den Reeck* in Ant-

44. MARY DEVEREAUX, "Beauty and Evil"; MARTIN LOIPERDINGER & DAVID CULBERT, "Leni Riefenstahl, the SA, and the Nazi Party Rally Films, Nuremberg 1933-34: 'Sieg des Glaubens' and 'Triumph des Willens'", *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 8, 1988, 3.

45. DAVID WELCH & ROEL VANDE WINKEL, "Introduction", 1; LENI RIEFENSTAHL (dir.), *Olympia* (released 1938), Venice, California, 2006. 204 minutes.

46. LENI RIEFENSTAHL (dir.), *Der Sieg des Glaubens* (released 1933), Chicago, 2012. 75 minutes; MARTIN LOIPERDINGER & DAVID CULBERT, "Leni Riefenstahl".

47. BRETT BOWLES, "The Attempted Nazification of French Cinema, 1934-44", in DAVID WELCH & ROEL VANDE WINKEL, (eds.), *Cinema and the Swastika*, 130-147, quote from 133.

48. DAVID WELCH, *Propaganda and the German Cinema 1933-1945*, Oxford, 1983, 158, n. 27. UFA from Universum Film-Aktien Gesellschaft.

49. ALAN SENNETT, "Film Propaganda: Triumph of the Will as a Case Study", *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 55, 2014, 45-65; quote from 61.

50. ROEL VANDE WINKEL, "German Influence on Belgian Cinema, 1933-45: From Low-profile Presence to Downright Colonisation", in DAVID WELCH & ROEL VANDE WINKEL (eds.), *Cinema and the Swastika*, 72-84, here 83, n. 12.



werp (screened to present “objective information about present-day Germany”); and once again at the Coliseum cinema in Antwerp by November 1, 1936.<sup>51</sup> It was reported that for a November 1, 1936 screening at the Filmuniversiteit *Herman van den Reeck*, “hundreds of interested parties had to be turned away” because there was not enough space to accommodate everyone.<sup>52</sup> In the following months it continued to be screened, for example by the Cercle du Cinéma at the Palais des Beaux-Arts (again) in December 1937—“only in the interest of the documentary aspects of the film,” the organizers stressed.<sup>53</sup>

David Welch writes that upon its release, “To the rest of the world *Triumph des Willens* was a terrifying picture of a newly emerging Fascist state,” but contemporaneous accounts suggest otherwise.<sup>54</sup> While it is true that French socialists and communists boycotted the movie when it premiered in France at the 1937 Exposition internationale de Paris—Riefenstahl was on hand for the event—audience reactions in France were congratulatory: “The film was very well received by the press and the cinematic world.”<sup>55</sup> In Belgium, already by April 1935 a journalist writing for *Le Vingtième siècle* who had seen the film in Germany praised it as a “grand film nazi,” and admired how it did not come across as propaganda (!).<sup>56</sup> A July 1935 report in the Catholic and Rexist *Soirées* by a journalist who had seen both *Sieg des Glaubens* and *Triumph des Willens* gushed at the latter’s success.<sup>57</sup> The writer of a September 1935 article in *Humoradio* on Riefenstahl—“the

muse of German cinema”—recalled Riefenstahl’s acting career, concluding that between her acting and directing she was “viewed as a sort of legendary figure in the film world.”<sup>58</sup> In December 1935, a Dutch-language journalist provided a biography of the “high-ranking, young director” before writing of *Triumph des Willens*: “It is the grandest film report that has been made to date, and also a political document of profound significance for generations to come.” That said, the article went on to question the film’s artistic merit, asking whether it might be better for Riefenstahl to “go back to the high mountains,” implying she abandon directing and return to acting.<sup>59</sup> Other reviewers questioned Riefenstahl’s skills as an artistic director, one concluding, “Germans have in *Triumph des Willens* a great document[ary], but no great work of art.”<sup>60</sup> Additional reviews following on the film’s first public screenings in autumn of 1936 praised it highly.<sup>61</sup>

At least one Belgian viewer recoiled at the film; this was exceptional. Writing for the anti-fascist, anti-Rexist weekly *Combat*, Denis Marion (Marcel Defosse<sup>62</sup>) called it boring and dismissed any claims to technical innovations. “Suffice it to say that at no moment did the director or the [camera] operators show any genius, or even any unique talent. They continuously effaced themselves before the theme that they had to tackle and assigned themselves the task of recording the phases of the congress with the greatest exactitude possible without ever trying to interpret them.”<sup>63</sup> Other Belgian critics took the picture’s contents,

51. *Pourquoi Pas ?*, no. 1159, 16 October 1936, 2971; *L’Indépendance belge*, 13 October 1936, 4; *Het Nieuwsblad*, 31 October 1936, 5; quote from “Filmvertooning: Triumph des Willens”, *De Schelde*, 31 October 1936, 5.

52. “Triomf van den Wil”, *De Schelde*, 3 November 1936, 5.

53. *La Libre Belgique*, 17 December 1937, 10.

54. DAVID WELCH, *Propaganda and the German Cinema*, 158.

55. JÉRÔME BIMBENET, *Quand la cinéaste d’Hitler fascinait la France: Leni Riefenstahl*, Panazol, France, 2006, 62–63, quote from 63.

56. “Some overly-long scenes do not stop this film from being an excellent production, a spectacle of the greatest interest, and at the same time a documentary of the first order.” “Un grand film nazi”, *Le Vingtième Siècle*, 26 April 1935, 8.

57. W. DUESBERG, “La prodigieuse carrière de Leni Riefenstahl”, *Soirées*, 26 July 1935, unpaginated [26–27].

58. MARCEL MAURAU, “Leni Riefenstahl, De Muze van de Duitsche film”, *Humoradio* no. 29, 6 September 1936, 25.

59. M. L., “Leni Riefenstahl, Een hooggeplaatste, jonge kineaste”, *De Schelde*, 20 December 1935, 5.

60. K. LUYTEN, “Een Filmtentoonstelling in Nazi-land: De triomf van de Wil”, *Zondagsvriend*, no. 20, 19 May 1935, 494.

61. E.g., “Le Triomphe de la Volonté”, *Pourquoi Pas ?*, no. 1161, 30 October 1936, 3126.

62. JACQUES DE DEKER, “Il était le doyen des lettres belges. Denis Marion est mort: un intellectuel polyvalent”, *Le Soir*, 26 August 2000, < [https://www.lesoir.be/art/il-etait-le-doyen-des-lettres-belges-denis-marion-est-m\\_t-20000826-Z0JLFLZ.html](https://www.lesoir.be/art/il-etait-le-doyen-des-lettres-belges-denis-marion-est-m_t-20000826-Z0JLFLZ.html) >, consulted on 14 September 2024.

63. DENIS MARION, “Le Triomphe de la Volonté”, *Combat*, 31 October 1936, 6.

style, and technique seriously, some praising it for technical or other elements. Architect and critic Victor Mattelaer praised the movie's style and encouraged emulation by Belgian filmmakers, for instance to show and develop crowds "bound by a unanimous feeling....a moral greatness superior to military gatherings."<sup>64</sup> Even critic Marion admitted the film powerfully depicted mass mobilization and the human need for group connection. "If I were the socialist party, for example, I would have already bought a copy of *Triumph of the Will* and I would force party members to come to a screening, to learn from it."<sup>65</sup> Put simply, Belgian film critics, whatever their political stripes, presented Riefenstahl and her film to their readers in rather straightforward ways and critiqued her film as a motion picture, not as the propaganda device of a terrifying regime.

Not only do such mixed reviews convey no sense of terror, Belgians embraced Riefenstahl's *Olympia* films when they were distributed in Belgium very soon after *Triumph des Willens*' release. In fact *Olympia* (in French, *Les Dieux du Stade*) had known, bankable appeal in Belgium and was extolled in the press.<sup>66</sup> She was fêted by royalty including King Leopold III, who flirted with her and asked her to go mountain climbing.<sup>67</sup> One laudatory report's only cautionary note was that scenes of nude, Greek god-like figures at the start of *Olympia—Fest der Völker* made it unsuitable for children.<sup>68</sup>

## V. Bwana Kitoko: The film

Unlike Riefenstahl's infamous film, Cauvin's *Bwana Kitoko* remains little known today. Its title, *Bwana*

*Kitoko*, is an obscure amalgam that deserves explanation. Accounts during the king's 1955 voyage reported that in parts of the Congo where Lingala was spoken, the king was met with cries of "*mwana kitoko*" or "handsome young man." Many Congolese who had learned in advance of Baudouin's arrival expected him to be kingly, which is to say old, and they were struck by his youth. (He was only 25 at the time.) Because some Belgians thought it demeaning for their monarch to be referred to familiarly by colonial subjects as a "handsome young man," they merged the Lingala *mwana kitoko* with the Swahili term *bwana*, "master," to make *bwana kitoko*: "handsome master." Thus this African-sounding movie title was in fact a European creation.<sup>69</sup> Blacks and whites in the Congo even picked up on the Frankenstein title, one critical article pointing out that, "About the title, it is said that the 'white people who know the native language well believe it is a foolish title'."<sup>70</sup>

Cauvin likely saw *Triumph des Willens* soon after its initial release, and an analysis of the two films as well as Cauvin's own words strongly suggests that Riefenstahl's pro-Nazi film inspired him when he made *Bwana Kitoko*. If Cauvin did not see *Triumph des Willens* when first screened in Germany, he surely saw it before World War II began. Cauvin was connected internationally and was immersed in the world of filmmaking throughout the 1930s. Before becoming a professional and while still practicing law, he not only filmed his own motion pictures, he became a film correspondent for *Le Face à Main*, *La Cinématographie française*, *L'Etoile belge*, and the Oostende-based *Le Carillon*. Already by 1930 he had written a report on an international conference he had attended that was dedicated to inde-

64. VICTOR MATTELAER, "Un film allemand", *Le Vingtième Siècle*, 25 November 1936, 8.

65. DENIS MARION, "Le Triomphe de la Volonté", 6.

66. "Een ongeëvenaarde filmpresentatie: Olympia, het feest der volken", *De Stad*, no. 20, 22 July 1938, 637.

67. STEVEN BACH, *Leni*, 166.

68. J. M., "Goden van het stadion, door Léni Riefenstahl", *Humoradio*, no. 27, 3 July 1938, n.p. [65].

69. MATHIEU ZANA AZIZA ETAMBALA, "« Bwana Kitoko » (1955), un film d'André Cauvin: Réalités congolaises ou rêveries belges?", in PATRICIA VAN SCHUYLENBERGH & MATHIEU ZANA AZIZA ETAMBALA (eds.), *Patrimoine d'Afrique Centrale. Archives Films: Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, 1912-1960*, Tervuren, 2010, 142-144.

70. "Over de titel wordt gezegd dat de 'blanken die goed de inlandse taal kennen, menen dat het een dwaze titel is'". "Kritiek op 'Bwana Kitoko' in Kongo: de zwarten vinden de film een grote mislukking", *Gazet van Antwerpen*, 7 November 1955.

pendent filmmaking.<sup>71</sup> In the 1930s, he served as now-legendary Belgian director Henri Storck's lawyer, and he was active in several film organizations.<sup>72</sup> Looking back in 1991, he wrote that in his youth he was "a conscientious and informed critic, also passionate about all of the production of the time period. From 1929 to 1939 I wrote about all of the movies that destiny has made into film classics."<sup>73</sup> Reflecting on these years in another late-life interview Cauvin stressed, "I went to the cinema as often as I could."<sup>74</sup> It is possible that Cauvin saw *Triumph* as of or right after its Berlin premiere. He already knew Riefenstahl's work, having reviewed *La Lumière bleue* (1932; Riefenstahl directed and starred) for *Radio Belgique*.<sup>75</sup> As *Triumph* was being distributed in German theaters and shown at film conferences, Cauvin was traveling internationally to attend such events.<sup>76</sup> *Triumph* was shown at the 1937 Exposition internationale des arts et des techniques appliqués à la vie moderne in Paris, where one of Cauvin's films also was shown, in the Belgian pavilion.<sup>77</sup> When Cauvin traveled to Paris that summer and attended the *concours international du meilleur film d'amateur*, surely he could not have failed to notice the German pavilion at the exposition because "Nazi Germany was in the spotlight."<sup>78</sup> In fact, he became an admirer of Riefenstahl's work, publishing a laudatory review of *Olympia* in *L'Etoile belge* in 1938; Cauvin set aside ideological considerations and concluded, "Its form is perfect."<sup>79</sup> When asked in a late-life

interview to reflect on his feelings toward Germany and the invasion of 1940, Cauvin remarked, "I had even seen the film of Leni Riefenstahl," meaning he had already viewed *Triumph des Willens* before May 1940.<sup>80</sup>

Fast forward to the 1950s and it was Cauvin now behind the lens directing a documentary feature to bolster the governing regime of his country. The making of *Bwana Kitoko* was a massive undertaking. The king's visit to Belgium's colony in 1955 that Cauvin captured on film was an official, month-long voyage that took him across much of central Africa by different modes of transport, including to Leopoldville (today Kinshasa), Matadi, Coquilhatville (Mbandaka), Elisabethville (Lubumbashi), the air base at Kamina, Ruanda-Urundi, and Stanleyville (Kisangani). Dozens of auxiliaries assisted Cauvin, and the authorities made available to him a subsidy of a million Belgian francs, an airplane, a helicopter, and "de nombreux collaborateurs."<sup>81</sup> As one commentator put it, "all possible technical equipment was placed at his disposal."<sup>82</sup> He worked closely with his government sponsors, hewing to the needs and desires of his producer—the Belgian state—going so far as to run the title of the film by the Ministry of Colonies to make sure it passed muster.<sup>83</sup> The Ministry of Colonies' information bureau made sure that several of their own photos were inserted into the book that Cauvin published based on the film, which came out in Dutch, French, and English.<sup>84</sup>

71. FLORENCE GILLET, "Cauvin (André)"; ANDRÉ CAUVIN, "Le IIe congrès international du cinéma indépendant à Bruxelles, 1930", *Travelling* 55, 1979, 36-38, first published in *Les Beaux-Arts*, Brussels, 12 December 1930.

72. E.g., the Association professionnelle de la presse cinématographique belge, the Fédération internationale de la Presse cinématographique (Fipresci), the Union belge des Cinéastes amateurs, and the Beroepsbond van de Belgische Filmpers.

73. Note by André Cauvin, 4 January 1991 (AGR2 AA1940, liasse 857).

74. "Interviews d'André Cauvin 2001-2003", 14 (Archives CegeSoma, *archives André Cauvin*, AB2376).

75. ANDRÉ CAUVIN, "La lumière bleue", *Radio-Belgique*, ca. 1932.

76. *La Libre Belgique*, 27 April 1935, 3; *La Libre Belgique*, 5 April 1935, 10; *Le Soir*, 1 August 1936, 2; documents in AGR2 AA1940, liasse 1116; ANDRÉ CAUVIN & JEAN LEYDER, "Le Cinéma au Congo Belge", *Les Vétérans coloniaux*, no. 10, 1947, 12.

77. *L'Indépendance belge*, 1 July 1937, 5.

78. JÉRÔME BIMBENET, *Quand la cinéaste*, 61; *La Nation belge*, 17 September 1937, 10.

79. ANDRÉ CAUVIN, "Les Dieux du Stade", *L'Etoile belge*, 1 July 1938, 6.

80. "Interviews d'André Cauvin 2001-2003", 32 (Archives CegeSoma, *archives André Cauvin*, AB2376).

81. MATHIEU ZANA AZIZA ETAMBALA, "« Bwana Kitoko »", 145.

82. J. L. [JOSÉ LOBEYA], "Réflexions sur le film 'Bwana Kitoko'", *La Croix du Congo*, 30 October 1955, 3.

83. Cauvin to Roland Detry (Ministry of Colonies), 11 July 1955 (AGR2 AA1940, liasse 364).

84. The book's publication was delayed because Inforcongo added photos to it "montrant le Congo moderne et industriel"; around 25 of the 125 photos in the book. Paul F. Merckx to Roland G. Detry (CID), 8 March 1956 (AGR2 AA1940, liasse 311).

*Bwana Kitoko* was a major motion picture designed to sway public opinion in favor of Belgian colonial control over the Congo, which is to say to bolster an authoritarian, racist regime. Cauvin knew propaganda's power well having been subject to it during the Nazi occupation of Belgium.<sup>85</sup> Just as Riefenstahl's film followed Hitler through Nuremberg and the unfolding of the Nazi Party Congress, so too did Cauvin shadow Baudouin during his visit, the first by him as king to his African empire. Just as the Nazi congress was carefully staged, so too were events during Baudouin's visit scripted and then captured on film by a collaborating director.<sup>86</sup> Reminiscent of Riefenstahl's *Sieg des Glaubens*, which was financed and owned by the Nazi Party (and after a brief public life, removed from circulation), Cauvin actually created two films in 1955. *Bwana Kitoko* was a feature-length documentary that was intended to be shown on the big screen in theaters in Belgium as well as screened in the Congo. In the colony, the public would be much smaller because of the relative paucity of cinemas or other venues in which films could be projected.<sup>87</sup> A second film, *Le voyage royal* (1955), represented an alternate cut of the first film (2:15 in length) that remained government property.

Cauvin innovated, as had Riefenstahl before him. Already in 1939, he had made *Congo, Terre d'eaux vives*, the first full-length motion picture filmed entirely in the Belgian Congo, and his 1952 feature *Bongolo* was the first color film shot there. *Bongolo* might have been the first production in film history to cast indigenous non-actors as the

movie's leads.<sup>88</sup> Aside from being the largest picture production ever filmed in central Africa to that point, *Bwana Kitoko* was also innovative for being made in color, which he achieved using Agfafilm, working with the company Gevaert. The use of a helicopter during filming over the mandate territories of Ruanda-Urundi resulted in the first helicopter flights ever in that region.<sup>89</sup>

The film's content reveals strong parallels with Riefenstahl's film. Apart from one extended segment of pygmies capturing an okapi—atypical for a propaganda film—*Bwana Kitoko* centers on the young, peripatetic figure of Baudouin and his encounters. Just as *Triumph des Willens* begins in a plane flying above clouds over Nuremberg, followed by a descent through those clouds, so too does Cauvin's film begin in the clouds with shots from Baudouin's plane as it flies above Congo, out of sight of Earth and its denizens. Just as Riefenstahl's film begins with a text over black sequence providing a historical capsule about the Third Reich, likewise does *Bwana Kitoko* commence with an introductory text in which the narrator sets the stage by recounting a history of Belgian accomplishments in Congo:

*Il y a moins de cent ans des explorateurs fameux franchissaient pour la première fois la région qui s'étend de part et d'autre de l'équateur..../Personne à l'époque ne soupçonnait les richesses de ses terres. Mais un roi clairvoyant, tenace et habile conçu des réalisations grand dessin prolonger son pays au cœur même de l'Afrique: unir le Congo à la Belgique!//Depuis*

85. ANDRÉ CAUVIN, *La Liaison dangereuse*, 23-24.

86. AGR2 AA1940, liasse 330, and GUY VANTHEMSCHÉ, "Belgian royals on tour in the Congo, 1909-1960", in ROBERT ALDRICH & CINDY MCCREERY (eds.), *Royals on Tour: Politics, Pageantry and Colonialism*, Manchester, 2018, 182.

87. Already by 1914, there were 650 cinemas in Belgium. By contrast, the colony had a color bar restricting Congolese visits to cinema, of which there were few. GUIDO CONVENTS, "Des images non occidentales au cœur de l'Europe avant la Première Guerre mondiale: en Belgique, par exemple", in ROLAND COSANDEY & FRANÇOIS ALBERA (eds.), *Cinéma sans frontières 1896-1918 Images Across Borders: Aspects de l'internationalité dans le cinéma mondial: représentations, marchés, influences et réception/Internationality in World Cinema [sic]: Representations, Markets, Influences and Reception*, Quebec, 1995, 54; GUIDO CONVENTS, "L'apparition du cinéma en Belgique (1895-1918)", *Les Cahiers de la Cinémathèque: Revue d'Histoire du Cinéma*, no. 41, 1984, 14-26.

88. LEEN ENGELEN, "Een Congolees aan de Franse Rivière: Het 'succesverhaal' van *Bongolo en de negerprinses* (1952)", in VINCENT VIAENE, DAVID VAN REYBROUCK & BAMBI CEUPPENS (eds.), *Congo in België: Koloniale cultuur in de metropool*, Leuven, 2009, 253-270.

89. Undated, unsigned publicity note (AGR2 AA1940, liasse 309).

*soixante-dix ans, les Belges gèrent au Congo l'héritage que leur a légué Léopold II.*<sup>90</sup>

The plane emerges from the clouds, with views of the city of Leopoldville below. (Baudouin's eventual successor in Congo, Mobutu Sese Seko, also borrowed the technique by having the televised news open with his face floating above and appearing out of the clouds.<sup>91</sup>) Cauvin's way of capturing the plane's approach to the colony's capital depicted progress. The sequence starts with scenes of nature along the Congo River, then indigenous huts and settlements, then European-style buildings, skyscrapers, and modern port facilities, suggesting the great advancements Belgians had achieved. The approach scene is eerily reminiscent of Hitler's arrival to Nuremberg in Riefenstahl's film. In both, the plane is a vehicle of deliverance, descending from the heavens with its precious cargo.<sup>92</sup> Baudouin's messianic arrival by plane to Leopoldville to start his 1955 tour is a nearly frame-by-frame recreation of Hitler's arrival to Nuremberg to begin the 1934 Reichsparteitag.

The uncanny echoes of *Triumph des Willens* continue. *Bwana Kitoko's* opening descent from the clouds is followed by a second scene showing Baudouin's plane landing, a scene nearly indistinguishable from *Triumph des Willens's* second scene of Hitler's airplane landing at Nuremberg. In a nearly identical scene, frame-by-frame, both planes touch down, turn, and taxi to a stop in front of enthusiastic crowds. Comparable shots show troops standing guard and ecstatic throngs greeting the Führer/King as he descends from his plane. The message was the same: the leader was on the technological vanguard. Traveling by plane in 1930s Germany had been still rare. When Hitler crisscrossed Germany by air to campaign in the 1932 election, he became

the first politician to use an airplane in this manner. Baudouin's arrival in 1955 conveyed the same message because regularized air travel to central Africa was fairly new, with SABENA having begun regular weekly flights just a few years earlier. In both films, the scenes of supporters awaiting their leader underlined their popularity.

Once arrived, Baudouin makes his way from tarmac to town in a long sequence in which Cauvin reproduced an extended shot in *Triumph of Hitler* being driven in a convertible into Nuremberg, the streets lined with throngs of supporters. Both films give the viewer the sensation of being close at hand, almost at the leader's side. Cauvin's camera follows Baudouin during a long convertible ride through Leopoldville, its streets lined with ecstatic multitudes. Just like Riefenstahl, Cauvin captures a scene from the point of view of the convertible as it passes through a city gate decked out with the leader's insignia, the camera panning upward, conveying a sense of movement as the car passes through the gate. In *Bwana Kitoko*, unlike at the airport where all well-wishers are white, in the convertible scene almost everyone lining the road is black. Neither long convertible sequence was staged, and if anything Cauvin failed to capture the full outpouring of enthusiasm for Baudouin, if contemporaneous accounts from accompanying journalists are to be believed.<sup>93</sup> One might suspect these journalists projected their own enthusiasm onto the scenes they witnessed, but at least one report from the Congo conveyed Congolese viewers' disappointment that Cauvin's film underplayed "the delirious enthusiasm of the crowd."<sup>94</sup> In any case, as with the arrival scene, the convertible scenes in both *Bwana Kitoko* and *Triumph des Willens* emphasized the leader's status. The remainder of *Bwana Kitoko* documents Baudouin during his long trip as he visits several

90. Excerpt from longer voiceover introduction. ANDRÉ CAUVIN (dir.), *Bwana Kitoko*, 1955. 77 minutes. In *Belgisch Congo belge, gefilmd door/filmé par/filmed by Gérard De Boe, André Cauvin & Ernest Genval*, PATRICIA VAN SCHUYLENBERGH, FLORENCE GILLET & GRACE WINTER (eds.), Brussels, 2010.

91. RUTH BEN-GHIAT, *Strongmen: Mussolini to the Present*, New York, 2020, 104; "OZRT Zaïre Actualités Intro 1970s (Mobutu Sese Seko Propaganda) - No Audio", 28 September 2021, < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J5zAoEyhixc> >, consulted on 7 January 2022.

92. MARY DEVEREAUX, "Beauty and Evil", 232.

93. MATHIEU ZANA AZIZA ETAMBALA, "« Bwana Kitoko »".

94. Note by Père Préfet, Lovanium, Kisantu, Belgian Congo [ca. 1955] (AGR2 AA1940, liasse 371).



cities, meets with different peoples of the Congo, traveling thousands of kilometers. *Bwana Kitoko* includes long scenes of nature, sequences of people dancing, and the aforementioned long digression showing step-by-step how pygmies used a complex procedure to capture okapi in the forest, an ethnographic move he made in other of his films, too.<sup>95</sup> The film concludes with a regatta, with Congolese rowers in *pirogues* straining with all their might in a race to reach the king's boat.

It bears noting that Cauvin's film is not entirely unique in showing the arrival of a national and imperialist leader who is then celebrated by adoring crowds. *The Queen in Australia* (1954) by producer Stanley Hawes is one example. Although showing British Queen Elizabeth II arriving to Sydney not by plane but by boat, this British documentary uses some similar devices to capture the sovereign's trip: a motorcade by car, with the queen in a convertible; adoring crowds; soldiers in formation under review; the queen's arrival to another part of Australia by plane. One might infer that Cauvin did not, in fact, draw special inspiration from Nazi propaganda. Viewed differently, films such as *The Queen in Australia* suggest just how unconscious and widespread was the influence of *Triumph des Willens*.

It bears noting that *Bwana Kitoko* was a creative work for which Cauvin employed deliberate visual strategies. In yet another echo of Riefenstahl, Cauvin sometimes claimed his film was a documentary of pure reportage. As he put it to Joseph Lifela, who collaborated with him on *Bwana Kitoko*, "I have only reported those images just as you and I and others saw them."<sup>96</sup> Yet as film expert Patricia Aufderheide puts it, "There is nothing natural about the representation of reality in documentary, documentary filmmakers are acutely aware

that all their choices shape the meaning they choose."<sup>97</sup> One has only to compare *Bwana Kitoko* to another film about the royal voyage, simpler and more straightforward, *De Koning in Kongo* (1955). The latter was a rather bland, black and white short documentary also reporting on the king's voyage.<sup>98</sup> By contrast, Cauvin's film was no mere documentary.<sup>99</sup> Cauvin was capable of pushing his films in different directions, as he did in *Bongolo*, a scripted film depicting a love affair. Indeed, Cauvin picked his scenes carefully for *Bwana Kitoko*, and it was not the first time. Consider his wartime picture *Congo*, which Cauvin filmed to persuade audiences as to the Belgian colony's contribution to the Allied war effort. *Congo* underlined the successes of colonial rule and contrasted what Belgians had achieved with the "savage and weird customs" of the Congo, where, they said, the law of the jungle reigned. Belgians were "building the health of a nation that was born out of darkness."<sup>100</sup> The film implicitly praised Leopold II in part by including shots of the impressive equestrian statue to him in the colony's capital, Leopoldville. Moreover, King Leopold's ghost seems to have shaped *Congo* subconsciously: the gentle narrator whom Cauvin cast for the film was played by an older, tall, bearded man bearing a conspicuous resemblance to the deceased king and founder of the colony.<sup>101</sup> Such language and imagery drew directly from oft-repeated official and semi-official Belgian rhetoric about Congo. Put simply, Cauvin was an auteur; *Bwana Kitoko* did not take shape by happenstance.

*Bwana Kitoko's* visual strategies conveyed not only the king's popularity but also that both country (Belgium) and colony (Congo) were diverse yet unified and disciplined, thanks to their Leader. The film covers a vast subject, namely a voyage of thousands of kilometers, distances dwarfing any trip that might be taken within the metro-

95. There is a long parenthesis on circumcision in *Bongolo* that takes the audience away from the romance between Bongolo (Joseph Lifela) and princess Doka (Petronelle Abapataki). ANDRÉ CAUVIN (dir.), *Bongolo*, 1952. 85 minutes.

96. Cauvin to Joseph Lifela, 10 November 1955 (AGR2 AA1940, liasse 346).

97. PATRICIA AUFDERHEIDE, *Documentary Film*, 11.

98. LODE VAN UYTVEN, *De Koning in Kongo*, 1955.

99. Père Préfet at Lovanium (Kisantu), [1955] (AGR2 AA1940, liasse 371).

100. ANDRÉ CAUVIN (dir.), *Congo*. Warner Bros. Pictures, 1944-45. 20 minutes. Accessed at NARA, College Park, Md.

101. ANDRÉ CAUVIN, *Congo*.



pole. Yet it centers on one man, highlighting his supremacy: Baudouin.<sup>102</sup> Scenes of crowds create a contrast that highlighted the degree to which the leader sat apart from and above the masses. The film shows Baudouin traveling across the colony, greeting Congolese from different ethnicities who are dressed variously, thereby implying his role as flywheel of the colonial project.<sup>103</sup> Some Belgians believed that Baudouin's person bore tremendous potential to unify and sustain Belgium's central African empire. In the latter half of the 1950s, officials broached the prospect of a *communauté belgo-congolaise* for which the monarchy would serve as linchpin, not unlike how some Dutch had earlier pushed for a "Netherlands-Indonesian Union" bound by their monarchy. Division and unity were questions that would have been familiar to Belgian viewers, divided as they were by language yet held together by the state and the monarchy, captured in the royal motto *L'Union fait la force/Eendracht maakt macht*. In *Bwana Kitoko*, Baudouin incarnated unity and acted as the "glue" fusing the diverse colony to the metropole, just as *Triumph* depicted Hitler as binding Germans together as one *Volk*.<sup>104</sup> One could conclude that Cauvin depicted Baudouin as the Belgo-Congolese *Führer*, even if of course he never used the term.

A surprising omission from *Bwana Kitoko* suggests yet another parallel of sorts between Riefenstahl's and Cauvin's films. Just as *Triumph des Willens* makes zero reference to the Church or Church leaders, so does *Bwana Kitoko* omit any Church scenes, and this despite the fact that Baudouin did indeed attend mass while visiting the colony, multiple times. According to one Congolese viewer, the film "gives the impression the king never set foot in a church during his entire stay in the colony. Which is completely false."<sup>105</sup> This omission is surprising not only because Catholicism was a

crucial element of cohesion that held the Belgian colonial edifice together, but also because of its fundamental role in Belgian unity and culture. This lapse is ironic considering that the film centers on the king and that religion was indispensable to the very Catholic Baudouin, a monarch who later went so far as to abdicate for a day to avoid having to sign an abortion rights law in Belgium.

Another theme of Cauvin's film that echoed Riefenstahl's is the country's vitality and youth. *Triumph* includes a series of scenes of Hitler Youth either in formation or at play, conveying strength and implying that Hitler's empire had a long, powerful future. Various scenes in *Bwana Kitoko* emphasize Congolese youth, including shots of young people, black and white, parading and performing in a stadium in Leopoldville. Just as many key scenes in *Triumph* were filmed in Nuremberg's massive Luitpoldarena, so too were scenes for *Bwana Kitoko* shot in Leopoldville's grand Baudouin Stadium which, when built, was the largest in Africa, holding 70,000 spectators. Shots of gymnastics in the book accompanying Cauvin's film that were taken in the same stadium—for the "*jeux et spectacles de Léopoldville*"—bear eerie resemblance to the gymnastics and choreographed dancing scenes in Riefenstahl's *Olympia—Fest des Schönheit*.

Both Cauvin's and Riefenstahl's documentaries show the country's leader reviewing troops, thereby associating him with military strength. In both, troops carry out exercises, exuding readiness and strength, which imparts the same message to the viewer: the leader has made the country strong. *Bwana Kitoko* shows Baudouin reviewing soldiers of the Force publique in formation; not soldiers of Belgium's army, which made sense because Belgium never sent national troops to the colonies.<sup>106</sup> Here again is a paral-

102. On this characteristic of Riefenstahl's film see DAVID WELCH, *Propaganda and the German Cinema*, 147-159.

On propaganda and strongmen, RUTH BEN-GHIAT, *Strongmen*, 91-118.

103. A promotional poster for the film shows Baudouin shaking hands with an African leader. GUIDO CONVENTS, *L'Afrique?*, 110.

104. See also the book accompanying the film, ANDRÉ CAUVIN, *Bwana kitoko*, 1956. On Hitler and the unity of the *Volk* in *Triumph des Willens*, see MARY DEVEREAUX, "Beauty and Evil", 232, 234.

105. J. L., "Réflexions". The film does show him laying the cornerstone of a church.

106. With the exception of a very small number right at the end of the colonial period. GUY VANTHEMSCHE, "The Belgian Colonial Empire", 978.



*Adolf Hitler greeting German subjects clothed in regional attire, suggesting a diverse country united through its leader. Source: Triumph des Willens, 1935.*



*King Baudouin greeting Congolese subjects clothed in regional attire, suggesting a diverse country united through its leader. Source: Bwana Kitoko, 1955.*

lel with *Triumph des Willens*, which restricts itself to showing members of the S.A., S.S., and Hitler Youth in formation, never soldiers of the German Wehrmacht. *Bwana Kitoko's* close-ups of several faces, all of them male, parallel the zoomed-in shots of men saluting the Führer in Riefenstahl's production.<sup>107</sup> Certain scenes in *Bwana Kitoko* unabashedly celebrate military strength, and Cauvin's notes on the film repeatedly reference scenes of an "arc de triomphe," at least one of which appears in the final film.<sup>108</sup> This emphasis on military power is odd considering Belgium was a small, neutral country overrun twice in the twentieth century. Whereas *Triumph* emphasizes how the Führer restored Germany, *Bwana Kitoko* underlines how Leopold II and his eventual successor Baudouin had brought the Congo from backwardness and wretchedness to advancement and strength.

Cauvin intended *Bwana Kitoko* as a document capturing the king's voyage to the Congo, but it was also a vehicle to shore up Belgian colonial control over Congo at a critical juncture in time. Even if many at the time viewed the Belgian Congo as an "oasis of stability," there were tensions in Central Africa and harbingers elsewhere in the colonial world signaling that overseas empire was under siege.<sup>109</sup> India and Pakistan were nearly a decade into their independence, and Indonesia had broken from the Netherlands in 1949. Belgium's southern neighbor, France, had retreated from Indochina and was now facing a violent insurgency across the Mediterranean in Algeria. Even if Europeans viewed sub-Saharan Africa as fated for indefinite colonial tutelage, events were unfolding in Gold Coast that would lead it to emerge as independent Ghana in 1957. Just like all the other colonial powers, Belgium faced this news with attempts to deepen and strengthen ties with its overseas possessions.

Authorities were highly attuned to the fact that the colony offered tremendous realized and potential resources. The Congo had provided essential funding to the government-in-exile during World War II as well as the uranium used to make the U.S. atomic bombs dropped on Japan. World War II and the Korean War had underlined the importance of access to raw materials.<sup>110</sup> To develop this essential asset, Belgium established a "ten-year plan" for colonial investment (1949), and some spoke of a "Belgo-Congolese Community" for which the monarchy would serve as fulcrum. *Bwana Kitoko* tried to strengthen Belgium's grip on its overseas possessions by depicting a leader who had everything under control.<sup>111</sup>

Cauvin's film was about the colony; it was also about Belgium. The release of *Bwana Kitoko* arrived at a critical juncture for the kingdom. Belgium was coping with the *Question Royale* or "royal question" about Leopold III's decision to remain in Belgium in 1940 rather than follow his government into exile as well as his subsequentmorganatic marriage in 1941 that was not carried out according to Belgian law. Then, as the war drew to a close, the Nazis brought Leopold III to Germany, meaning Liberation found him still there at war's end (in Austria), making him even more suspect in the eyes of many. When he finally went back to Belgium after a five-year exile, his attempted return to the throne sparked riots and a general strike that led to several deaths. With the country on the edge of civil conflict, Leopold abdicated in favor of his twenty-year-old son Baudouin, who took the oath in 1951.

*Bwana Kitoko* exercised an important role in the consolidation of the monarchy. When Baudouin ascended the throne, the Saxe-Cobourg dynasty was questioned by many, but Baudouin became

**107.** STEVEN SPIELBERG's *Schindler's List* (1993) later echoed this scene from *Triumph des Willens*. ROBERT DASSANOWSKY, "Der Einfluß Arnold Fanck und Leni Riefenstahl im zeitgenössischen amerikanischen Film", in FRIEDBERT ASPETSBERGER (ed.), *Der BergFILM 1920-1940*, Innsbruck, 2002, 113-24, 113.

**108.** AGR2 AA1940, liasse 307.

**109.** This was a contemporaneous expression that has echoed over the years. STANARD, "Boom!".

**110.** GUY VANTHEMSCHE, *La Belgique et le Congo: Empreintes d'une colonie 1885-1980*, Brussels, 2007.

**111.** GUIDO CONVENTS, *L'Afrique?*, 111.





Adolf Hitler reviewing troops in Nuremberg. Source: *Triumph des Willens*, 1935.



Baudouin reviewing troops in Leopoldville. Source: *Bwana Kitoko*, 1955.

popular following the film's release. It was said that the young king, known for his taciturn appearance, "found his smile" in Africa. Cauvin's film cemented acceptance of Baudouin and helped change his public image for the better. "Once back in Belgium, his prestige increased steadily; his successful Congo voyage undoubtedly contributed to his growing domestic popularity."<sup>112</sup> Baudouin remained popular in Belgium and the Congo right up until his sudden death in 1993, which was accompanied by an outpouring of grief.

## VI. Reception

*Bwana Kitoko's* premiere took place in Brussels on 17 October 1955, with Cauvin, the mwami of Ruanda, the mwami's wife, and other luminaries present.<sup>113</sup> The film was then screened at gala openings outside Brussels, including in France, and shown in commercial release elsewhere in Europe.<sup>114</sup> Widely covered in the press, it continued to be shown in a small number of cinemas in Belgium into 1958 and was released in the Belgian Congo, Switzerland, Finland, and Sweden, among perhaps other countries.<sup>115</sup> It went on to earn Cauvin hundreds of thousands of Belgian francs. Reception was mixed. While press coverage in Belgium suggested strong audience reactions, some reviews were critical.<sup>116</sup> One reviewer lamented the fact that the voiceover was done by a Frenchman, not a Belgian.<sup>117</sup> Congolese did not respond particularly favorably, according to press coverage out of the colony.<sup>118</sup> As noted, some Congolese believed Cauvin had failed to capture

the full outpouring of enthusiasm for Baudouin. Despite Minister of Colonies Auguste Buisseret's congratulatory note to Cauvin saying that his film "will help tighten the connections between Belgium and the Belgian Congo," the colony broke from Belgium less than five years after *Bwana Kitoko's* premiere.<sup>119</sup>

Although the colony was "lost" in 1960, in subsequent years Belgians resurrected and rescreened Cauvin's film, and for decades it helped shape what Belgians thought about the colonial past. *Bwana Kitoko* and *Triumph des Willens* are similar in this way as well: portions or images from each were recycled for decades. The long-term impact of *Triumph des Willens* on people's thinking about the Nazi era results largely from the repeated showing of clips and imagery from the film over decades, right down to today, and despite bans in some countries. Writing at the end of the last century, historian Tony Barta observed that, "Triumph of the Will matters not for the relatively small number of people who have seen all of it but for the millions over half a century who have seen some of it."<sup>120</sup> Unlike the ban on *Triumph des Willens* in Germany after 1945, there was no prohibition in Belgium after 1960 against showing *Bwana Kitoko*. Images from Cauvin's film, recycled for decades, intensified the rose-tinted view of the 1950s as a golden age of tranquility and success in the Congo.<sup>121</sup> Cauvin's film was shown on *Radio Télévision belge francophone* (RTBF) in 1984.<sup>122</sup> By 1992, the Cinémathèque de Belgique had restored the movie, and it was screened publicly that same year, for instance at

112. GUY VANTHEMSCHE, "Belgian royals on tour", 183.

113. Unknown periodical, ca. 21 October 1955 (AGR2 AA1940, liasse 367); J. L., "Réflexions".

114. See letters in AGR2 AA1940, liasse 366.

115. Jacques Lauwers (Century Pictures) to Cauvin, 28 May 1958 (AGR2 AA1940, liasse 322).

116. AGR2 AA1940, liasse 380; *Le Ligeur*, 11 November 1955, 4; "Le sujet imposé et les cinéastes (Kaütner, Cauvin)", *L'Echo de la Bourse*, 20 October 1955.

117. JEAN COLIN, "Et les Belges?", *Gazette de Liège*, 30 October 1955.

118. "Kritiek op 'Bwana Kitoko' in Kongo: de zwarten vinden de film een grote mislukking", *Gazet van Antwerpen*, 7 November 1955; J. L., "Réflexions".

119. A. Buisseret to Cauvin, 20 October 1955 (AGR2 AA1940, liasse 325).

120. TONY BARTA, "Film Nazis: The Great Escape", in TONY BARTA (ed.), *Screening the Past: Film and the Representation of History*, Westport, Conn., 1998, 127-148, here 131.

121. MATTHEW G. STANARD, *The Leopard, the Lion, and the Cock: Colonial Memories and Monuments in Belgium*, Leuven, 2019.

122. As part of the program, "L'Ecran Témoins" on RTBF. ETIENNE UGEUX, "La colonisation belge", *Le Soir*, 27 February 1984, 23; *Telemoustique*, no. 3030, 24 February 1984.

the Festival de Gand.<sup>123</sup> As noted, *Bwana Kitoko* was once again played on Belgian television in 2010 on the Flemish channel VRT. The film and its subtle endurance over time shaped language and culture in the country in the form of the very term “Bwana Kitoko,” which came to serve as a shorthand for Baudouin and the late colonial state generally, sometimes ironically, other times with nostalgia. The frequent recourse to imagery from the film contributed to a widespread impression in Belgium and elsewhere that the Belgian Congo was a stable paradise of secure white rule in the 1950s. Many concluded this idyll came to a crashing halt only because of an independence botched by African infighting, Lumumba’s ambitions, and the violence of the Congo Crisis when, in fact, the situation in the mid-1950s was hardly as tranquil as remembered.<sup>124</sup>

To understand how the film could have had such a lasting impact, it is important to remember that most Belgians never went to the Congo, meaning that the information they received in the metropole was crucial to forming their views on colonialism and their memories of it after 1960. While many knew someone who lived in the colony at the time—one thinks of Lieve Joris’ travelogue, *Terug naar Congo*, in which she retraces her missionary uncle’s footsteps—only a small minority had direct experience with the colony.<sup>125</sup> Compare the number of Belgians in Congo with those living in Ixelles, one of nineteen communes that make up the city of Brussels. In 1959, Ixelles boasted some 90,000 inhabitants in an area just smaller than seven square kilometers. That same year, 89,000 Belgians were living in Congo. Thus in 1959, at the most intensive moment of Belgian colonization, the seven square kilometers of Ixelles were home to more Belgians than lived in the colony, with the 89,000 in the Congo

scattered over some 2,345,000 square kilometers. (The colony was nearly 80 times larger than the metropole.) Moreover, Belgians basically never encountered Congolese in Europe. Those Congolese living in Belgium during the colonial era were few in number. An example is Paul Panda Farnana who, when war broke out in 1914, joined the Corps des Volontaires Congolais (CVC) to fight for Belgium. Only two dozen Congolese joined Panda Farnana because there were so few in the metropole. The Congolese community in Belgium before 1960 numbered not in the tens of thousands or even thousands, but in the hundreds—on the eve of independence, perhaps no more than 300 individuals. It was not until the second half of the 1990s that the population of Congolese origin in Belgium increased significantly. By way of comparison, with the “Windrush generation”, almost an entire generation of post-colonial migrants arrived in Britain between 1948 and 1971; hundreds of thousands of Moroccan, Tunisian or Algerian migrated to France around the same time. In short, for decades Belgians were seldom if ever exposed to their (former) colonial subjects.

The paucity of colonial settlers on the ground in the Congo had important repercussions at the time of the country’s independence. In 1960, there was an exodus of Belgians from Central Africa, leaving only a very small number there. This “exodus,” however, was small, and the number of Belgians who returned to Belgium could not have exceeded one percent of the Belgian population. By way of comparison, nearly one million *piénoirs* left for France around 1962, not counting the ninety thousand *harkis* (90,000) who came at the same time.<sup>126</sup> The end of Portugal’s colonial wars and the independence of Portuguese colonies led to at least 500,000 Portuguese resettling in the mother country, increasing its population by 5-9

123. F. B., “André Cauvin remonte le temps sur le fleuve Congo”, *Le Soir*, 15 October 1992; “Boudewijn I in Kongo”, *De Morgen*, 15 October 1992.

124. MATTHEW G. STANARD, “Revisiting Bula Matari and the Congo Crisis: Successes and Anxieties in Belgium’s Late Colonial State”, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 46, 2018, 144-168.

125. LIEVE JORIS, *Mon Oncle du Congo*, trans. MARIE HOOGHE, Arles, 1990.

126. ELIZABETH BUETTNER, “Postcolonial Migrations to Europe”, 601-620, and EMMANUELLE SAADA, “France: The Longue Durée of French Decolonization”, 85-101, in MARTIN THOMAS & ANDREW THOMPSON (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Ends of Empire*, Oxford, 2018.



percent.<sup>127</sup> These migrations to France, Portugal, and others to former colonizing countries brought with them the return of colonial experiences and memories; in Belgium, not so much.

Because of Belgium's particular colonial rule, the inhabitants of Ixelles and their Flemish and Walloon compatriots elsewhere in the country received most of their knowledge about the colony at home in western Europe. What they did learn, they learned mainly from the state, the church, colonial veterans and passionate colonial enthusiasts, and in productions like *Bwana Kitoko*. As a result, for most Belgians life in colonial Congo was *la vie en rose*. At that time and after independence, Belgians regarded their colonial past with sanguinity—lacking information or direct experiences with the colony, Belgians confabulated memories of their colonial past.

A key factor is the essential role of the 1950s and propaganda like *Bwana Kitoko*. Throughout the colonial period, propaganda was produced to promote the colony in Belgium, first under Leopold II and then after 1908 under the Belgian state. This propaganda reached its peak in the 1950s. At that time, much production of information about the colony was done through the INFORCONGO service, a service of the Ministry of Colonies that produced colonial films, exhibitions, publications and much other propaganda. There was little so-called “independent” information. Few journalists traveled to the colony because of the cost and legal restrictions, and the Belgian government provided free photographs, texts, film clips and other documentary material from the colony to journalists. Other means of propaganda reinforced a positive view of Belgian rule in the Congo, including monuments such as those to Leopold II that multiplied during the 1950s. The result? The information available to Belgians in the 1950s and 1960s about the situation in the Congo was largely produced by the government and those who were passionate about Central

Africa. Then, decolonization occurred, and suddenly so. Very quickly, the situation deteriorated and became internationalized. The images that now emerged from the Congo were of mobs, riots, killings, disorder and anarchy. Whereas journalists were largely excluded from the colony before 1960, they now arrived in large number, and not only from Belgium but from other countries as well. The result was a deluge of images of what came to be called the Congo Crisis that created a striking “before and after” contrast in people's minds. During the 1960s, 1970s, and beyond, when Belgians remembered their colonial history, few could draw on personal experiences, and most of the “primary materials” they had to elaborate memories were images and information from the fifties, all of it capped by an ugly decolonization that made the 1950s look that much better in comparison; this dynamic only intensified the power of Cauvin's film. These innumerable positive images from the fifties continue to circulate for decades, and Belgian brains filled in memory gaps through confabulation.

One consequence of Belgian pro-colonial propaganda and the specific caesura of Congolese independence was that for decades Belgians looked back on their past colonialism in positive terms, which makes for a sharp contrast with post-war views of pro-Nazi propaganda and the Nazi regime. Indeed, whereas Riefenstahl passed away a controversial figure, Cauvin died well considered. Both former filmmakers worked assiduously to control their public image, and still today one can find defenders of Riefenstahl's oeuvre. Cauvin carefully guarded the rights to his filmed work and closely followed how people viewed them, and him.<sup>128</sup> In 1957, he went so far as to pen a letter to the Ministry of Colonies' Centre d'information et de documentation du Congo belge et du Rwanda-Urundi (CID) to complain about a *single* projection of an apparently low-quality print of *Bwana Kitoko* at one school in the Brussels commune of Uccle, asking them, “would you be able to carry

127. CHRISTOPH KALTER, “Building Nations After Empire: Post-Imperial Migrations to Portugal in a Western European Context”, *Contemporary European History* 33, no. 1, 2024, 140.

128. AGR2 AA1940, liasses 346 and 354.

out a small investigation into this subject and, on the other hand, make sure that from here on out this copy is never again presented in the state in which it was."<sup>129</sup> Such efforts along with Belgian nostalgia for the colonial past worked in Cauvin's favor. In 1999, on the eve of the fortieth anniversary of the Congo's independence, the commune of Braine-l'Alleud celebrated Cauvin as one of its most illustrious inhabitants at a ceremony at which *Bwana Kitoko* was shown once again.<sup>130</sup> In February 2003, Cauvin was made an Officier de l'Ordre de Léopold.<sup>131</sup> In the end, Cauvin was never faced by questions of moral responsibility because of the widespread acceptance of the validity of Belgian colonialism until his dying day.

## VII. Conclusion

Cauvin's *Bwana Kitoko* had enduring effects on attitudes in Belgium into the twenty-first century regarding the country's (former) colony, meaning

the film deserves greater attention in the history of propaganda. Although Cauvin's positive depiction of Baudouin and the colonial situation did not forestall Congo's independence, it shaped memories of empire in Belgium for decades. The film's incredible similarities with *Triumph des Willens*, which predated it by twenty years, and Cauvin's admiration of Leni Riefenstahl suggest that her infamous pro-Nazi documentary directly influenced Belgium's pro-colonial propaganda in the post-World War II era. Although Riefenstahl died a beleaguered controversial figure, Cauvin died admired in his home country and his greatest film continued to be shown into the twenty-first century despite its long-outdated ideological underpinnings. That *Bwana Kitoko* could continue to be shown for decades after the decolonization era was a hangover of Cold War dynamics that helped legitimize colonialism, or at least obscured its violence. In Belgium itself, few had any problem with the film because to them it represented the reality of the 1950s because so few had experienced the colonial situation directly.

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### List of abbreviations

AGR2 AA1940: "André Cauvin" archives at the Archives générales du Royaume 2, dépôt Joseph Cuvelier, AA1940  
 BRT: Belgische Radio- en Televisieomroep  
 CegeSoma: Centre d'Études et de Documentation Guerre et Sociétés contemporaines/Studie- en Documentatiecentrum  
 Oorlog en Hedendaagse Maatschappij  
 CFS: Congo Free State  
 CID: Centre d'information et de documentation du Congo belge et du Ruanda-Urundi  
 DRC: Democratic Republic of Congo  
 Fipresci: Fédération internationale de la Presse cinématographique  
 KBR: Royal Library of Belgium  
 NARA: National Archives and Record Administration (USA)  
 OZRT: Office Zaïrois de Radio Télévision  
 RTBF: Radio Télévision Belge Francophone  
 UN: United Nations  
 VRT: Vlaamse Radio- en Televisieomroeporganisatie

**129.** Cauvin to Sandrart (CID), 28 January 1957, AGR2 AA1940, liasse 366.

**130.** JENNIFER WUILQUOT, "La commune célèbre un de ses plus illustres habitants", *Le Soir*, 16 November 1999.

**131.** JEAN-PHILIPPE DE VOGELAERE, "André Cauvin retrouve le vrai sourire de sa vie passée", *La Dernière Heure*, 18 February 2003.