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Liberating Minds: The Intellectual Legacy of Angela Davis and Its Images in Film

Liberando Mentas: O Legado Intelectual de Angela Davis e Suas Imagens no Cinema

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We propose thinking of Angela Davis's intellectual legacy from a decolonial perspective. We point out that just as the fight for civil rights and the end of racial segregation in the United States helped to consolidate the Black movement in Brazil, the circulation of anti-colonial ideas during the struggles for the decolonization of African countries in the 1950s and 60s was crucial to the circulation of abolitionist ideas and anti-racist movements in the United States and abroad. We will analyze interchanges capable of pointing out "the recognition of multiple and heterogeneous colonial differences, as well as the multiple and heterogeneous

reactions of populations and subjects subordinated to the coloniality of power" (Bernardino-Costa & Grosfoguel, 2016, p. 21). Our contribution seeks to analyze Davis as a public and militant intellectual through her images in film. Beyond considering Angela Davis's image in cinema as representation, we also analyze how her intellectual and political activities were involved with the flourishing of a new Black cinema in the United States. This paper analyzes films such as *Child of Resistance* (1973), *Free Angela and All Political Prisoners* (2015), and *13th* (2016).

Keywords: decolonial, Black independent cinema, Angela Davis, abolitionism

Liberando Mentas: O Legado Intelectual de Angela Davis e Suas Imagens no Cinema

*Propomos pensar o legado intelectual de Angela Davis a partir de uma perspectiva decolonial. Ressaltamos que, assim como a luta pelos direitos civis e o fim da segregação racial nos Estados Unidos ajudaram a consolidar o movimento negro no Brasil, a circulação de ideias anticoloniais durante as lutas pela descolonização dos países africanos, nas décadas de 1950 e 1960, foi crucial para a circulação de ideias abolicionistas e movimentos antirracistas nos Estados Unidos e no exterior. Analisaremos intercâmbios capazes de apontar "o reconhecimento de diferenças coloniais múltiplas e heterogêneas, bem como as reações múltiplas e heterogêneas de populações e sujeitos subordinados à colonialidade do poder" (Bernardino Costa & Grosfoguel, 2016, p. 21). Nossa contribuição busca analisar Davis como uma intelectual militante por meio de suas imagens no cinema. Além de considerar a imagem de Angela Davis no cinema enquanto representação, também analisamos como suas atividades intelectuais e políticas estiveram envolvidas com o florescimento de um novo cinema negro nos Estados Unidos. Este artigo analisa filmes como *Child of Resistance* (Filho da Resistência; 1973), *Free Angela and All Political Prisoners* (Libertem Angela e Todos os Presos Políticos; 2015) e *13th* (2016).*

Palavras-chave: decolonial, cinema negro independente, Angela Davis, abolicionismo

Don't believe the hype, it's a sequel
As an equal, can I get this through to you
My 98's boomin' with a trunk of funk
All the jealous punks can't stop the dunk
Comin' from the school of hard knocks
Some perpetrate, they drink Clorox
Attack the black, 'cause I know they lack exact
The cold facts, and still they try to Xerox.
— Public Enemy, "Don't Believe the Hype"

Introduction

We propose thinking of Angela Davis's intellectual legacy from a decolonial perspective. The decolonial project proposes a dialogue between the colonized and racialized living under relations marked by the colonality of power. Therefore, we point out that just as the fight for civil rights and the end of racial segregation in the United States helped to consolidate the Black movement in Brazil, the circulation of anti-colonial ideas during the struggles for the decolonization of African countries in the 1950s and 60s was crucial to the circulation of abolitionist ideas and anti-racist movements in the United States and abroad.

Therefore, according to Dussel (1979/1995), to overcome Eurocentric modernity, a "utopian project" is needed to lead us to something beyond the racist and patriarchal structures constituting modernity. It is crucial to construct an alternative project that starts from the Global South and from those made subaltern by Eurocentric modernity (Grosfoguel, 2008). The 2020 anti-racist protests indicate that a Transatlantic movement for justice, equality, and "epistemic diversity" can transcend its utopian character. Hence, we want to highlight the relationship between Angela Davis's intellectual legacy and the decolonial project. This essay takes an intersectional and transnational approach to analyzing the different depictions of Angela Davis in film. Intersectional in the sense that it considers the different racial and political structures conditioning Angela Davis's life, how these structures intersect, and how her image was appropriated and transformed into mass culture. At the same time, we implement a transnational analysis since the racial and political structures mentioned above also affect the way Davis's ideas and images travel across borders.

Our contribution seeks to analyze Davis as a public and militant intellectual through her images in film. Beyond considering Angela Davis's image in cinema as representation, we also analyze how her intellectual and political activities were involved with the flourishing of a new Black cinema in the United States, influenced by postcolonial African cinema. We will analyze interchanges capable of pointing out "the recognition of multiple and heterogeneous colonial differences, as well as the multiple and heterogeneous reactions of populations and subjects subordinated to the colonality of power" (Bernardino-Costa & Grosfoguel, 2016, p. 21).

The first instance of this is a short film made in 1970 in which French writer and political activist Jean Genet publicly supports the Black Panthers. He also defends the civil rights movement, including the freedom of Angela Davis and the film *Child of Resistance* (1973), directed by Haile Gerima and inspired by the imprisonment of Angela Davis on October 13, 1970. We will also consider in this text documentaries such as *Free Angela and All Political Prisoners* (2015) and *13th* (2016) and the amendment to the United States Constitution that abolished slavery.

We have included several recent films in the analysis, which have not yet been extensively considered in other studies focusing on Angela Davis's image and

how it interacts with the anti-racist struggle. Angela Davis's talk in 2019, in São Paulo, is also not analyzed by the academy, considering depictions of Angela Davis in the films.

Writing About Angela Davis's Image: Transnationalism, Intersectionality and Coloniality

"Author". "Academic". "Activist". "Revolutionary". These are some of the words used to describe Angela Davis. They express the different dimensions of her work as an intellectual and the influence she has had on anti-racist movements and image production. As an activist for political revolution or a jailed accused, she built an intellectual legacy with various writers and scholars, protesters, and radicals who have engaged and continue to do so. As an abolitionist thinker, her work has tried to articulate an analysis of class and capitalist relations along with race, gender, Black culture, and mass incarceration.

Davis's (2003) *Are Prisons Obsolete?* and her chapter in *A Companion to African American Philosophy* (Davis, 2007) offer a profound critique of the prison system, emphasizing its roots in historical racism and its ongoing impact on Black communities. She argues that the mass incarceration of Black individuals is not just a byproduct of crime, but a continuation of racial control mechanisms historically rooted in slavery and segregation. This perspective is crucial in analyzing the portrayal of prisons in films, where the racialized nature of punishment often goes unquestioned (O'Sullivan, 2001).

Films, as cultural artifacts, often reflect and shape societal perceptions of crime and punishment, either reinforcing or challenging prevailing narratives. The interplay between Davis's critique of the prison system and films' portrayal of incarceration underscores the importance of recognizing and addressing the institutional racism embedded in both the criminal justice system and its representations in the film industry. This text analyzes how hegemonic representations of crime and punishment have also impacted the creation of images of Angela Davis.

At the same time, Angela Davis's journey, from her involvement in civil rights activism to her academic contributions, represents a critical voice in the discourse on racial justice and prison abolition. Her work not only highlights the disproportionate impact of mass incarceration on Black communities but also advocates for a radical rethinking of justice that transcends mere reform, aiming for a complete overhaul of the system (Davis, 2003, 2007). This approach, echoed in the films analyzed, calls for a deeper understanding of the historical and societal contexts that shape the prison system and its portrayal in the media.

Intersectional thinking has been an inspiration for intellectuals committed to the aims of progressive and emancipatory politics. The starting point of the film *Free Angela and All Political Prisoners* (2014), directed by Shola Lynch,

concerns the movement for the liberation of Angela Davis. However, it is also about the legacy of African American women and the political history of Black feminism that is so closely related to Angela Davis's trajectory.

As we started to think about the right words to begin this paper, one of our objectives was to create a section on how the work and image of Angela Davis have impacted social movements in Brazil. We agreed that one of the starting points would be her recent lecture, "Freedom Is a Constant Struggle" (TV Boitempo, 2019), in the classes of the international conference: "Democracy in Collapse?". Nonetheless, as we listened to her talk, available on YouTube and promoted by Boitempo, a left-wing publisher in Brazil, and Trade Sector Service, a service that the commercial sector has created, we found this interesting remark made by Angela Davis:

I always feel really awkward because I feel as if I'm being made to represent Black feminism, and why is it that you here in Brazil have to look to the United States of America [loud applause]. I don't understand. I mean, I think I've learned more from Lélia Gonzalez than you will ever learn from me. She was writing about intersectionality before the term came into existence, and she called upon us to develop new identities, new political identities. I like her term "Amerindian" and "Amerafican"; they're broad terms that are inclusive without being assimilatory. I wanted to say that; I always have to say, I feel really awkward because it seems to me that we in the United States should be learning from your really vibrant tradition of Black feminism. (TV Boitempo, 2019, 00:52:23)

Should we be asking ourselves about the influence of Angela Davis on Brazilian Black feminism? If we are to follow Davis's own words, shouldn't we be thinking in terms of sharing ideas and experiences and not influencing? At that moment, when Angela Davis officially recognizes the importance of Lélia Gonzalez, she brings together many elements to reflect on some issues, such as intersectionality and imperialism, only confirming her brilliance.

Going back to Shola Lynch's film, in her documentary, *Free Angela and All Political Prisoners*, released in 2013, the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) philosophy professor — who had just returned from Germany — goes beyond the Black Panther group and gets involved with the Che-Lumumba Club, a majority Black group from the American Communist Party, influenced by the decolonization struggles on the African continent and by an anti-imperialist ideology. Che-Lumumba Club honors two international leaders in the struggle for the decolonization of Africa and South America: Che Guevara and Patrice Lumumba. The importance of Angela Davis's relationship with the Che-Lumumba Club is explored in Shola Lynch's documentary, and it reveals, in addition to some of Angela Davis's disagreements with the Communist Party, a pan-Africanist, anti-imperialist and anti-sexist perspective which highlights her decolonial posture *avant la lettre*.

Moving forward in the exploration of the concept of the "oppositional gaze", developed by bell hooks (1992), within the context of Black women's artistic production, the aim is to shift away from the normalization of Whiteness. This process centers the creative works of Black women, highlighting a world not weakened and cynical due to structural racism but rather one deeply affected by the enduring legacies of coloniality, entailing anti-Black, sexist, and homophobic power structures. This displacement is essential to ensure that the study of Whiteness does not inadvertently contribute to a renewed focus on Whiteness itself, as cautioned by hooks in 1992.

Our primary objective is to contemplate the notion of an oppositional gaze that enables the creation of images that exist beyond the traditional confines of the spectator's gaze, taking command of the narrative. This gaze seizes control over the very act of representation. To achieve this, we have chosen to analyze depictions of figures like Davis as portrayed by Black women directors such as Ava DuVernay and Shola Lynch.

According to bell hooks (1992) in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, when Black Americans first tuned into television, they quickly realized that what they witnessed was intricately linked to the ideals of White supremacy. Consequently, engaging with these images and connecting with White American cinema became an exercise in critical thinking, capable of challenging the negation of Black representation and the perpetuation of stereotypes. The concept of an "oppositional gaze" is intimately tied to the cultivation of critical spectatorship because, as hooks (1992) asserts, "black looks, as they were formed within the context of social movements for racial uplift, were interrogative gazes" (p. 116). This approach gave rise to impactful films like *13th* and *Free Angela Davis and All Political Prisoners*, directed by Ava DuVernay and Shola Lynch, respectively. Still, according to bell hooks (1992):

spaces of agency exist for black people, wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what we see. The "gaze" has been and is a site of resistance for colonized black people globally. Subordinates in relations of power learn experientially that there is a critical gaze, one that "looks" to document, one that is oppositional. In resistance struggle, the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating "awareness" politicizes "looking" relations – one learns to look a certain way in order to resist. (p. 116)

American independent Black cinema has emerged from this oppositional standpoint, rooted in the cultivation of critical spectatorship that dares to scrutinize imagery, representation, and racism. Therefore, by adopting the concept of an "oppositional gaze" as a foundational paradigm not only for North American Black cinema but for the waves of Black cinema worldwide, we aim to contemplate how Black women have contributed to cinema in Brazil. They have, in various respects, maintained an oppositional gaze towards Whiteness, racism, and sexism while illuminating the perpetuation of colonial dynamics.

Our second challenge revolves around conducting an intersectional analysis that avoids equating distinct forms of oppression or endorsing a cumulative perspective where factors such as race, class, sexual orientation, and gender are viewed as independent forces that simply accumulate. An intersectional analysis should not disregard the role of the "racial dimension", as it is precisely within this context that the concept gains its significance. Simultaneously, dissecting various forms of oppression in isolation contradicts historical realities, as these issues are interconnected in a web of ongoing relationships influenced by the enduring legacies of patriarchal and racist power structures.

By problematizing the question of American imperialism and understanding it as part of a structure in which White supremacy is the backdrop, Angela Davis understands the need to value leaders and voices from the "South", as we mentioned in the lecture above, "Democracy in Collapse?". Therefore, as writers of this text, we were, at first, also influenced by an underlying imperialistic effort, which is to suppose that every movement should be analyzed as having a vector moving from the North toward the South. In other words, it seems self-evident that Angela Davis is an important influence on Black movements in Brazil, but what about the opposite? Do Black feminists in Brazil also influence the North? The concept of the "Black Atlantic" could be helpful here, since it argues that Black cultural and political practices are multifaceted and transnational (Gilroy, 1993). Instead of analyzing Black history with the nation-State as the main unit of analysis, this text takes Gilroy's suggestion to understand Black history by having the Atlantic as a central reference. To analyze Davis's image in film, instead of centering our comments on the North American context, we have decided to consider the different repercussions and exchanges that those images have stimulated across different borders.

Angela Davis's reference to the concept of "intersectionality", coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), is key to shedding light on processes of governance, justice, and racial policing, and it proposes an understanding of racism in articulation with other forms of structured oppression. The term "intersectionality" even became a form of classifying feminism, for example, intersectional feminism. Crenshaw's ideas articulate intersectionality with an analysis of institutional racism and how it creates a situation of invisibility for Black women.

According to her, the narratives that could benefit White women, structured around chastity, or Black men, structured on the resistance against lynching, do not benefit Black women (Crenshaw, 1989). The recognition of Lélia Gonzalez as one of the founding figures of the concept must be stressed and valued. Davis's speech helps us to understand how structural racism works and is entangled with imperialism. The journalistic culture that distorts and appropriates Davis's image also affects how the voices of other Black women are introduced to society. Therefore, a truly decolonial and transnational approach should not ignore that, within social movements and academia, voices are muffled by asymmetries, which are reproduced even against the will of those struggling against oppression. As Almeida (2018) has already pointed out, structural racism (which differs from

institutional racism) is not about individual or intersubjective racism; it is a colonial structure that imposes itself independently of the actions of the people composing institutions.

In his critical work, *O que É Racismo Estrutural?* (What Is Structural Racism?), Almeida (2018) offers a nuanced differentiation between structural and institutional forms of racism, emphasizing the systemic nature of racial disparities ingrained in the societal framework. He posits "structural racism" as an extensive network of racial oppression, spanning across various institutions, encapsulating the compounded effects of societal elements that systematically favor one race over others. Conversely, "institutional racism", according to interpretations by Ture and Hamilton (1992), concentrates on the discriminatory practices prevalent within specific societal sectors — such as the criminal justice system, educational institutions, and healthcare —, highlighting the ways these practices uphold racial inequalities. This concept, while appearing narrower in scope, is fundamentally rooted in a structural understanding of racism, challenging simplistic views of racism as mere interpersonal prejudice. Ture and Hamilton's elaboration on institutional racism serves as a pivotal critique against the misconception of racism as solely intersubjective, advocating instead for an acknowledgment of racism's deep-seated embedment within societal structures, norms, and historical contexts. This approach underscores the imperative to transcend beyond individual-level analyses, recognizing the broader, systemic perpetuation of racial disparities that structural and institutional racism illuminate.

It is essential to reaffirm the compromise with penal abolitionism and the need to engage in the "ideological struggle". Racism has a colonial basis, and unless we recognize that institutions are built with coloniality and capitalism as their structuring pillars, change cannot be attained (Ture & Hamilton, 1992). As Davis stressed in her speech, those structures need to be dismantled, and radical thinking should focus on the construction of new structures that are neither racist nor patriarchal (TV Boitempo, 2019). To seek change, we need institutions that do not reproduce coloniality and capitalist structures, which are patriarchal and racist.

Therefore, the analysis of Angela Davis's image in film should not ignore how the "politics of liberation" can be transformed into the "politics of fashion", as explained in the article "Afro Images: Politics, Fashion, and Nostalgia" (Davis, 1993). In this text, Davis narrates a situation in which someone is "admonished" for not knowing her; when the person realizes, remembering her name, remembrance comes accompanied by the words: "oh, (...) Angela Davis the Afro" (Davis, 1993, p. 37). Her image became part of a "dominant journalistic culture", part of an "economy of journalistic images" (p. 38). The author mentions that her name was listed in the *New York Times Magazine* among the "fifty most influential fashion (read: hairstyle) trendsetters over the last century" (Davis, 1993, p. 37). In her words, the "invasive and transformative power of the camera" and "the ideological contextualization of my images" left her with "little or no agency" (p. 39). Angela Davis (1993) also posits that one

of the reasons that her images entered this hegemonic imagetic system was her "presumed criminality" (p. 38).

The purpose of this text is to recover some of Angela Davis's (1993) reckoning about her images and how those images might become "ahistorical and apolitical" when appropriated by journalistic culture. Therefore, one cannot think about Davis's images without reflecting on their appropriation. For instance, how pictures featuring a model representing her in courtroom scenes or imitating the picture on her wanted poster were used to sell clothes. "Afro images" are ambiguous when incorporated into a hegemonic structure since they are commonly used as part of an anti-Black establishment to sustain the criminalization of Blacks (e.g., Davis's wanted poster produced by the FBI) and appropriated by the fashion industry. However, Davis's images are also part of a resistance imagery that will endure and inspire future generations.

Angela Davis and L.A. Rebellion

Jean Genet Parle d'Angela Davis (Jean Genet Talks About Angela Davis; 1970) features the renowned existentialist writer, Jean-Paul Sartre, reading a manifesto denouncing the American racist police in defense of the Black Panthers and demanding the immediate release of Angela Davis. Filmed by the Video Out group, comprising Carole and Paul Roussopoulos, on October 16, 1970, at the Hotel Cécil in Paris, Jean Genet's participation was at the invitation of writer Rezvani, who talked, among several intellectuals, with Jean Genet in the television program *L'Invité du Dimanche* (Sunday Guest), which ended up being censored and did not air. In a passage by *Jean Genet Parle d'Angela Davis*, the writer comments:

Angela Davis is now in your grip. Everything is in place. Your cops — who have already shot a judge, the better to kill three Blacks — your cops, your administration, your judges are training every day, your scientists as well, to massacre the Blacks. First, the Blacks. All of them. Then, the Indians who have survived until now. Then, the Chicanos. Then, the radical Whites. Then, I hope, the liberal Whites. Then, the White administration. Then yourselves. The world will then be free. After your passage, the memory, the philosophy, and the ideas of Angela Davis and the Black Panther will remain. (Ferrer, 2020, para. 7)

The material that gave rise to Carole's film was available in the Institut National d'Audiovisuel database and is currently part of the estate of the Centre Pompidou in Paris. Anticipating censorship by the Office de Radiodiffusion Télévision Française (the governmental organization in charge of radio and television in France from 1964 to 1974), Genet himself asked Carole Roussopoulos to record him reading a pamphlet in defense of Angela Davis.

It is important to point out the involvement of the writer Jean Genet with

the Black Panther party and with the civil rights movement in the United States during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Before the arrest of Angela Davis, Jean Genet traveled to the United States clandestinely in March 1970, and he lectured at many American universities — City College of New York, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Yale, UCLA, Stanford — in defense of the Black Panthers, which the writer pointed were the Marxist revolution that American White youth needed to support to advance fundamental structural change in the progressive political field. As Robert Sandarg (1986) points out in the article "Jean Genet and The Black Panther Party":

in early March 1970, Connie Mathews, Black Panther International Coordinator, approached Genet in Paris and requested his aid. For several reasons, Genet agreed to help. He empathized with oppressed people and had written two plays dealing with French colonialism: *The Blacks* (1959) and *The Screens* (1966), set in Africa. Genet had subsequently abandoned literature and turned directly to radical politics. (p. 270)

As noted in the Shola Lynch documentary, Angela Davis's arrest was able to mobilize a great deal of international attention to the case. Her arrest was celebrated by former President of the United States Richard Nixon, who congratulated the FBI, having listed Angela Davis as one of the nation's 10 most dangerous figures. The tireless work of Shola Lynch in her documentary was recently recognized even by Angela Davis herself — who mentions the fact that Lynch's film recovered elements and feelings that were hitherto unclear around her arrest in 1972. Davis revealed this fact in the debate organized by Professor Gaye Theresa Johnson at the University of Santa Barbara, California, in 2014:

and then, when I actually saw the first cut of the film, I realized there were aspects of that history that I didn't even know. As a matter of fact, I never knew how it was that the FBI actually caught me. All I knew was that they found me and they arrested me, but I didn't know the history until Shola interviewed one of the FBI agents who arrested me. (University of California Television (UCTV), 2014, 00:06:02)

In addition to the arrest, the fact that the American philosopher was fired from UCLA for admitting her affiliation to the American Communist Party provoked a strong social upheaval not only on the UCLA campus — with the direct involvement of several teachers in defense of Angela Davis — but in society in general. This movement collaborated to make Angela Davis one of the most important names in the Black movement and the struggle for civil rights and social justice around the world.

Therefore, one of the central hypotheses that we would like to propose in this essay is the possible influence of Angela Davis in the formation of the L.A. Rebellion cinematographic movement — carried out by UCLA film students in the 1970s — and in the constitution of a new Black cinema, as pointed out

by Clyde Taylor (2015) in *Once Upon a Time in the West... L.A. Rebellion: "months before I saw *Harvest* for the first time, Roy Thomas, another provocative colleague at Black Studies at UC Berkeley, arranged a screening of Gerima's *Child of Resistance* (1973), which parabolically examines a frame-up of Angela Davis"* (p. 17). Also, according to film critic Clyde Taylor, the presence of Ousmane Sembène and Angela Davis in the 1980s brought international recognition to the African Film Society, created at UCLA by film students.

We had a flash of recognition around 1980 when the African Film Society hosted a reception for Ousmane Sembène in the Bay Area. We had the satisfaction of watching the mutual admiration between Sembène, widely recognized as a great international film director, and Angela Davis, free and no longer hunted, both connected in different ways to the filmmaking insurgency at UCLA. (Taylor, 2015, p. 17)

The film *Child of Resistance* (1973) by Haile Gerima, an Ethiopian filmmaker who has lived and worked in the United States since 1968, showed one of the leaders in the L.A. Rebellion movement. It revealed the influence and aesthetic affinity with the films of Ousmane Sembène, *Borom Street* — a short film released in 1963 — often considered the first film ever made in Africa by a Black African — and *La Noire de* (Black Girl; 1966). In both Sembène films, as well as in Haile Gerima's *Child of Resistance*, the main character is marked by intense introspection, expressed by the presence of an inner voice exposing feelings, desires, fears, and dreams to the viewer, who is not used to dealing with Black humanized characters in the cinema.

Latin American cinema, such as the movement *cinema novo* (new cinema) from Brazil, starting in 1952, might also have influenced the movement L.A. Rebellion (Guimarães, 2020). It is important to remember that Adélia Sampaio, the first woman to direct a commercial fictional movie in Brazil, participated in the movement *cinema novo*. As Clyde Taylor (2015) comments: "each film or discovered filmmaker added a stroke to the developing self-portrait of once invisible people. Every new film from Sembène or from Cuba, Brazil or the Philippines, old movies from China, became building blocks of self-knowledge" (p. 15).

***13th*, 2016: "Don't Believe the Hype"**

Ava DuVernay's documentary, *13th* (2016), presents an analysis of the intersection between race, justice, and mass incarceration in the United States, framed within the historical context of the 13th Amendment. This amendment, while abolishing slavery, left a constitutional loophole that has been exploited to perpetuate the enslavement of Black Americans through criminalization and penal labor. DuVernay traces the evolution of racial control mechanisms from the post-Civil War era of convict leasing to the modern-day prison-industrial

complex, highlighting the economic incentives behind mass incarceration and its devastating impact on communities of color.

The documentary examines how each period in American history has found new ways to oppress Black individuals, from Jim Crow Laws to the war on drugs and the current for-profit prison system. A key point discussed is the strategic criminalization of minor offenses, which disproportionately targets African Americans, leading to their forced labor, disenfranchisement, and exclusion from the political system. This systemic issue is further compounded by the political rhetoric and policies that have historically reinforced racial stereotypes, contributing to a cycle of violence and incarceration that impacts generations.

DuVernay does not shy away from critiquing both Republicans and Democrats for their complicity in the growth of the prison-industrial complex while also acknowledging the internal divisions within the African American community regarding crime and punishment policies. The documentary culminates in a poignant discussion on the normalization of violence against African Americans, juxtaposed with a message of hope and resilience, reminding viewers of the joy and humanity that persist despite systemic oppression.

The documentary also emphasizes the role of the media and political discourse in shaping public perceptions of Black criminality, drawing a line from D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) to contemporary news coverage. In "Black American Cinema: The New Realism", Diawara (1993) scrutinizes the profound impact of D. W. Griffith's film on the American cinematic and cultural landscape, highlighting its pivotal role in establishing a fraught narrative around race. This film, as Diawara points out, not only solidified Hollywood's stance on the portrayal of Black Americans but also entrenched damaging stereotypes that have persisted for decades:

with *The Birth of a Nation* came the ban on Blacks participating in bourgeois humanism on Hollywood screens. In other words, there are no simple stories about Black people loving each other, hating each other, or enjoying their private possessions without reference to the White world because the spaces of those stories are occupied by newer forms of race relation stories which have been overdetermined by Griffith's master text. (Diawara, 1993, p. 3)

By glorifying the Ku Klux Klan and demonizing Black characters, Griffith's work laid the groundwork for a legacy of racial bias in media, influencing subsequent generations of filmmakers and audiences alike. This legacy is underscored in *13th*, where Ava DuVernay connects historical cinema to the perpetuation of racial stereotypes and systemic injustices faced by Black Americans today. Diawara's (1993) analysis reveals the lasting consequences of Griffith's film, serving as a critical touchstone for understanding the intertwined relationship between race, media representation, and systemic inequality.

Ava DuVernay's work highlights the powerful influence of lobby organizations in crafting legislation that benefits the prison industry, underscoring the deep-seated

financial motivations behind the incarceration of millions of Americans. The documentary argues that the film *The Birth of a Nation* created the iconography later used by the Ku Klux Klan, a case of life imitating fiction. As argued in the documentary, *The Birth of a Nation* also serves to create a heroic portrayal of the Ku Klux Klan. Later in the 20th century, cinema and marketing campaigns appropriated Black iconography, such as Angela Davis's trial and the *afro* becoming a fashionable hairstyle. Angela's afro and her trial are also mentioned in Ava DuVernay's film.

During the film, Van Jones, attorney and founder of the nonprofit organization Dream Corps, says that Angela appearing with an afro at the trial was not exactly a political statement but resulted from the fact that she was "facing major time" (00:48:30), and therefore "she didn't go and press her hair" (00:48:35), while "most people" would "have been there with little white gloves on, praying to Jesus. She came in like this. And she devastated the prosecution and walked out of there free" (00:48:40). Still according to his words in the film, "the system tried to put the sister on trial, and the sister said, 'No, we puttin' you on trial'" (00:48:00).

Another activist subjected to a search was Assata Shakur. As Angela Davis points out, Shakur's image (with an afro) was also used by "the media to represent her as a dangerous criminal" (00:47:32). Angela Davis's image during her trial gained a life of its own, including commercial appropriation. In this context, while today, the judgment of a Black woman can be aestheticized as a form of marketing, having an afro can still cause you to be criminalized. For example, in Salvador, the state with the highest percentage of Black people in Brazil, a Black teenager with an afro (the name of the victim was hidden in the article) was brutalized by a police officer in February 2020. The police officer was caught on camera saying: "for me, you're a thief; look at this hair" (*Moradores Filmm Agressão Policial a Adolescente em Salvador: 'Você Para Mim É Ladrão, Olha Esse Cabelo', diz PM, 2020*).

One of the ambiguities underlying the appropriation of Black imagery to analyze film production is that the image of Black people can be used to make a profit while still being mobilized as a symbol of criminality. Therefore, more than analyzing Angela Davis's images and her legacy, her reflections on the use of her own images could be used to analyze cinema production in Brazil and the world, for example, how hegemonic images still represent Black people as dangerous criminals while counter-hegemonic images, produced by Black women, represent White people as invasive and violent (Sales & Muniz, 2020). The article "Black Women's Oppositional Gaze Making Images" (Sales & Muniz, 2020) shows how the hair of Black women is the theme of many film productions using the afro hairstyle as a symbol of empowerment and counter-hegemonic initiatives. Brazilian directors, most of them White, have often used the image of Black people to represent criminality. This fact shows how structural racism must be fought through an ideological struggle, including cinema production. Thankfully, Black directors have for decades been questioning anti-Blackness

and hegemonic narratives in Brazil, including the commercial and anti-Black appropriation of Black cultural practices.

The strategic depiction of afro hairstyles in film underscores this ideological struggle, symbolizing a reclaiming of Black beauty standards and cultural identity. It exemplifies how cinema can transcend mere entertainment to become a site of resistance against dominant cultural narratives. The endeavors of Black directors to navigate and subvert the commercialization and misrepresentation of Blackness further illustrate cinema's role in the ideological fight against racism. Through these acts of creative defiance, cinema emerges not just as a reflection of society's racial dynamics but as an active participant in shaping the discourse on race and identity, offering a vision for a more inclusive and equitable representation in the arts.

Concluding Remarks

In the realm of film, the representation of Black identities often oscillates between commercial exploitation and the reinforcement of criminal stereotypes, presenting a complex ideological battlefield. This duality invites a critical analysis through Angela Davis's lens, particularly her insights into the power dynamics of image use in cinema. Counter-narratives, especially those crafted by Black female creators, disrupt traditional portrayals, offering a critique of racialized violence and challenging the viewer's perceptions. These films not only counteract stereotypes but also serve as a medium for ideological resistance, highlighting the transformative potential of cinema in addressing racial injustices.

Angela Davis's legacy can be understood as part of a Transatlantic movement that includes many other Black women and racialized groups from the Global South, including those working in film production. Even though "intersectionality" is an important concept, the excerpts and images analyzed in this text show that Davis proposed a form of politics that transcended intersectional feminism. She challenged hegemonic structures and narratives through filmmaking, political protest, and academic work, as well as challenging the system itself — questioning it and defying it in the courts. Intersectionality is an important instrument to analyze how hegemonic narratives, including filmmaking and journalism, never serve to protect Black women. This remark is also true in Brazil; nonetheless, the specific functioning of hegemonic narratives demands thorough consideration of the intellectual and artistic production of Black women living in specific contexts of segregation and oppression.

Looking at the intersection of oppression demands and considering the geopolitical conditions affecting the politics of race and class, this paper analyzes Transatlantic exchanges occurring through filmmaking and activism across the Black Atlantic (Gilroy, 1993), stressing how Angela Davis's intellectual legacy (and her representations) is crucial to the anti-racist cause, in the United States and abroad, from a decolonial perspective.

The examination of Angela Davis's intellectual and cultural legacy reveals a profound influence on the discourse surrounding racial justice, gender equality, and the decolonial movement. However, the scope of her impact extends far beyond the confines of the United States and Brazil, touching various corners of the Global South. Davis's advocacy and scholarly work resonate with global struggles against colonial legacies and racial oppression, underscoring the interconnectedness of liberation movements worldwide.

Her role in shaping Black feminist thought and practice offers invaluable insights into the complexities of navigating intersectional identities amidst pervasive colonial structures. By engaging with Davis's work, scholars and activists alike can uncover strategies for dismantling systemic barriers to equality, drawing from her rich blend of theory and praxis. This broader perspective enriches the understanding of her legacy, highlighting the universal relevance of her contributions to global movements for justice and equality.

Moreover, Davis's emphasis on solidarity across borders and her critique of neoliberal capitalism provides a framework for addressing contemporary challenges faced by marginalized communities around the world. Her vision for a more equitable society, free from the shackles of oppression, serves as a guiding light for ongoing struggles against racial, gender, and economic injustices. By expanding the discourse to include Davis's impact on a wider international scale, we can better appreciate the enduring significance of her work in the fight for a truly decolonized and just world.

Biographical Notes

Michelle Sales is a researcher, teacher and independent curator. She is an associate professor at the School of Fine Arts at Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (2010), and collaborator in the Postgraduate Program in Multimedia at Universidade Estadual de Campinas. She is a coordinator of the research network *Cinemas Pós-Coloniais e Periféricos*, in Brazil and Portugal, and of the project *As Práticas Artísticas Contemporâneas e o Pensamento Pós-Colonial e Decolonial*. She holds a PhD in Contemporary Studies from the Pontifícia Universidade do Rio de Janeiro and the University of Coimbra (2018–2020). Between 2014 and 2020, she was an integrated researcher at the Centre for 20th Century Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of Coimbra, where she coordinated the research project *À Margem do Cinema Português* (2020), funded by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. Former fellow of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, in the Foreign Researchers program (2013–2014). She works in the following areas: postcolonial studies, intersectional feminism and film studies.

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