

'(Pas) Mon Pays': from Congo to Belgium and back again

By [Eva Decaesstecker](#) on 23 January 2020

With the documentary film *(Pas) Mon Pays*, the Antwerp artist Bie Michels, born in Congo, looks at the influence of the colonial past in Belgium and Congo from different perspectives. With her personal form of documentary making, she is looking for a way to contribute to the decolonization debate. The theme of 'right of say' is central: who is allowed to say what and where?



(Pas) Mon Pays consists of two parts. Both chapters look at the shared history of Congo and Belgium. One takes place in Mechelen, the other in Congo.

Michels considers neither Belgium nor Congo entirely as 'mon pays' (my country'). After all, how do you determine where you belong when several countries play a role in your life? Is that where you are born? Where you have lived the longest? Or where you have most in common with the other inhabitants?

The colonial past that crisscrossed Michels' life makes these questions all the more acute. Certainly the second part in Congo gives the concept of 'homeland' an extra charge: there where you can react to your surroundings.

Part one: questioning Belgian civilization

In the first part, Michels, together with the filmmakers Paul Shemisi and Nisar Saleh - with whom she is making the film - and a group of Congolese Malinois, goes in search of a new

inscription for the colonial monument of Lode Eyckermans at the Schuttersvest in Mechelen. This sculpture, which shows two stylised African faces, pays homage to the '31 pioneers who died for civilisation in Congo', including the notoriously cruel commander Van Kerckhoven.



'(Pas) mon Pays' by Bie Michels

Because, visually speaking, the statue seems more of a tribute to the Congolese themselves than to the white occupier, Michels decided to have a duplicate of the statue made and, together with the Congolese community in Mechelen, to look for a new, more appropriate inscription.

The first part of the film takes the viewer along in the months of discussions around the new inscription. We hear a broad set of questions and reflections, which approach the issue from all sorts of angles. Should other Congolese exemplary figures be mentioned instead of the 31 'pioneers'? Should we only talk about the atrocities of the past or should we also look to the future? Should the text arouse feelings of guilt? Whose pain should it express? Were all the participants of the colonization equally bad?

Michels clearly places herself in the background in the editing, but doesn't figure herself away.

The speakers and their voices are regularly disconnected, so that the conversations float over the discussing group. Who says what is not so important. Michels mainly wants to show us a constructive and nuanced debate, where there is room for different opinions. In her editing she clearly places herself in the background, but she doesn't figure herself out. Just like the others she is one of the voices in the discussion about a new inscription.

In between you get to see the creation process of the duplicate. The hands of a white sculptor sculpt and gradually create the plaster statue. Of course it is not Lode Eyckermans, but because of the discussion fragments, the reference is quickly made: someone who performs 'on commission of'. Eyckermans also carried out his sculpture commissioned by the government, based on a design by architect Jan van Meerbeeck.

A text is formed from everyone's knowledge.

The process of creating the sculpture underscores the intended end result of the discussions. Just as a figure is sculpted out of similar chunks of clay, a text is also formed which is composed of everyone's knowledge. From a tribute to pioneers of 'Congolese civilization' they make a commemoration of the millions of victims of that same colonization. The chronology and rectilinear structure of this chapter strengthen the persuasiveness with which the group prepares itself to present the image and its new inscription to the then mayor of Mechelen, Bart Somers (Open VLD).

Bowing to political power?

The first part ends in a disappointment: the mayor suddenly appears to have already finished a text, a historical interpretation drawn up by an academic from the University of Antwerp, and so there is neither interest nor room for this new inscription.

Do not remove the monument, but give it a new meaning.

Nevertheless, it is important that Michels decided to document this process. In the current debate about the many monuments that heroise Belgian colonisation in Congo, this project seeks a concrete answer: do not take the monument away, but give it a new meaning.



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Unfortunately, due to a lack of political interest, the replica and its inscription now ended up in an exhibition hall. That was mid-October in Mechelen, at the Contour Festival. When I

myself walked around in that hall, it turned out that the image and the film primarily reached a white audience that was already working on the issue.

It's a shame to leave it at that, isn't it? Wouldn't it be interesting for Michels to continue this practice of repurposing colonial monuments throughout Belgium? To overwhelm mayors everywhere with proposals for the monuments and street names that honour still to this day undisturbed horror?

As a citizen, do you have to wait for political permission?

In addition, I can't help wondering why the new text wasn't simply placed clandestinely next to the monument? As a citizen, do you have to wait until the political power gives its permission? Or are you allowed to intervene if you think that is necessary?

Part two: uncomfortable back to Congo

While the first part deals with the perception and presentation of Congo in Belgium, the second part traces out the marks Belgium left behind in Congo. Michels herself was born south of Kinshasa and spent her childhood there as the daughter of native Belgians.

In this part, she goes back to her country of birth for the first time, in search of her parental home. We get to see the places from her childhood, both in black and white photographs from then, as well as in their current state: the house, the primary school, the swimming pool and Unikin, the university where her father worked.

You feel discomfort: this country is no longer hers.

While in the first part you could link the title (*Pas) Mon Pays* to a 'not in my name' idea, in part two it raises very different questions. Michels' observant attitude here contrasts sharply with the active and enterprising attitude before. You feel a kind of discomfort: this country is not (or no longer) hers. She can't set up conversations here to question her surroundings together with others, even though this is her country of birth. Her presence is no longer self-evident and she chooses to show it.

So the camera, the center of her artistic practice, also turns out to be problematic here. Filming in public space is not self-evident in Congo. Even with a permit it can still be difficult. The government is not keen on it, wants to have control over the image that circulates of Congo abroad and wants to prevent certain images from giving rise to revolt.

Filming loses its obviousness and becomes a theme in itself.

But the Congolese population also distrusts the camera. In the past, they were mainly subjected to the camera of the occupying forces and had no say whatsoever in the image that was distributed of them. Filming, which is not questioned in part one and which is above all a means of recording and sharing the work process, now loses its self-evidence and becomes a theme in itself.

Even more than in the first part, speakers and their voices are now disconnected. We hear academics, a slam poet, passers-by in the street and while we are being guided through Michels' parental home or looking at the university site, the squares and streets in Kinshasa.

Where in part one this disconnection mainly supported the rich debate, the disconnection of voice and speaker now mainly creates a fragmentary and searching effect. You can feel Michels searching for legitimacy for her presence. What you now hear and see also contrasts with each other.



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We hear someone say that especially images of Congo with a lot of poverty are doing well on the market, while for example more architectural images do not interest anyone. At the same time, the camera slides past and through the obsolete university buildings.

Michels says she didn't come to Kinshasa to paint a miserable picture of it. She believes in positivity and creativity. But despite a few hopeful voices, such as those of a committed history student, this second part doesn't exactly cheer you up. What you see and hear is - as the government already fears - anything but positive and should indeed call for revolt.

Rather personal than detached

But Michels doesn't appropriate an *agency* for herself. She does not contribute to the content of the conversations we hear, but can only observe. The contrast between voice and image underscores her powerless position, as if only through retrospective editing she can add anything to her experiences in Kinshasa.

The contrast between voice and image underlines her powerless position.

Where you get a clear narrative in the first part, that is not so clear in part two. A very personal story - the return to her childhood and to the world in which her parents lived and worked - is juxtaposed with the political, social and economic situation of today's Congo.

The subjects Michels discusses are all related to the colonial period: the university, built during colonisation; the problematic relationship with the camera, which has arisen since the

misery caused by colonisation; the current problematic politics of Congo, which has never outgrown Belgian colonial politics...

Michels consciously interweaves memory and history.

Michels consciously interweaves these two lines of memory and history. They lay a more personal layer over this second part. This personal overtone feels fragile and sometimes uncomfortable, but the choice not to take an anthropological view or to observe her country of birth from an 'objective' distance, is a powerful signal.

Michels thus explicitly distances himself from the problematic attitude of classical anthropology, in which a researcher or documentary maker sees himself as neutral and can therefore report objectively on a certain situation.

Searching in the background

(Pas) mon pays is therefore mainly about right of say: who is allowed to say what, where and what? This has nothing to do with someone's nationality, Michels clearly shows. What matters is who is recognized as someone with the right to speak. But also: who has the feeling of being able to claim space to speak?

What matters is who is recognized as having the right to speak.

In Mechelen, a text by an academic has more to say than a group of united citizens. The group that does not feel heard enough, in turn, demands attention by means of concrete action. In Kinshasa, on the other hand, Michels, 'as a Congolese', struggles with her own position: she wants to look to her personal history, but wants to put herself in the background because of the broader history that hangs on her identity.

In order not to take up a dominant position, Michels stays with who she is and lets the others speak. Despite (or just thanks to) her own colonial past, she has found a way to contribute to the decolonization debate through this personal form of documentary making. Not only because of the subject of the film, but especially because of the caution with which she searches again and again for her own place in the face of this sensitive subject.