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Gold Coast (2015) and Danish economies of colonial guilt

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses Daniel Dencik's feature film *Gold Coast* (2015), about the last phase of Danish colonialism in today's Ghana, as an example for recent representations of Danish colonial history. Combining historian of ideas Astrid Nonbo Andersen's exploration of Danish narratives of "innocent colonialism", Gloria Wekker's concept of "White Innocence", and film historian Thomas Elsaesser's model of "guilt economies" as a feature of the legacy of perpetrator nations (2014), the article provides a framework within which to examine figurations of colonial guilt and innocence in *Gold Coast*. The main argument is that the film's treatment of colonial guilt primarily takes the form of maintenance of innocence. It thereby contradicts the challenges currently being pitted elsewhere against the narrative of innocent colonialism.

KEYWORDS

Danish colonialism; Ghana; Danish film; memory culture; guilt management; slavery; whiteness; US Virgin Islands

Daniel Dencik's *Gold Coast* (*Guldkysten*, 2015) is one of the first feature films to thematize Danish colonial history,¹ and the first to focus on the former Danish possessions in West Africa, the Danish Gold Coast, part of today's Ghana.² *Gold Coast* depicts, from the point of view of a young official new to the coast, the last phase of Danish colonialism in these parts, and the process of its decomposition.

The film includes multiple references to historical facts, persons, and places, and in so doing contributes to acquainting the audience in Denmark and abroad with a presumably little known chapter of Danish history. In this sense, *Gold Coast* belongs to a recent wave of Nordic cinema addressing Scandinavian colonialism and race ideology.³ It also belongs to the most recent phase of Denmark's addressing its legacy as a colonial power, which culminated in 2017, when the centennial of the transfer of the former Danish West Indies—today's US Virgin Islands—to the USA was commemorated by a considerable number of memorial events, historical and art exhibitions, panel discussions, and conferences.⁴ One of the main foci of the public debate on this occasion was the question of whether or not Denmark is comparatively guilty or innocent, and can be held accountable for violence and power imbalances past and present. The issue manifested itself for instance in renewed claims about apologies and reparations.⁵ No official apology to those affected by the transatlantic slave trade and enslavement has been offered so far, or can be expected in the foreseeable future. Instead, the choice of words of Danish politicians on several occasions throughout the year was the phrase that slavery "is

unforgivable," allowing them to express regret but avoid an actual apology.⁶ On the same occasions, colonial history and enslavement were described as "shameful," pointing at the affective dimension of a nation's coming to terms with the past that is interconnected with economic and political aspects.⁷ The last occasion occurred in November 2017, when Queen Margrethe II. paid Ghana a state visit accompanied by politicians and business representatives. While the Queen herself in public remarks declined any present accountability for past Danish involvement in the slave trade,⁸ foreign minister Anders Samuelsen used the same phrasing as Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen had used earlier in the year.⁹ His speech was widely, but falsely, understood and reported as an official apology.¹⁰

Historian of ideas Astrid Nonbo Andersen describes in detail the trajectory of Danish debates about official apologies and compensations in her book *Ingen undskyldning* (No Apology, 2017). She has also been a sought-after expert when questions of apologies and reparations were much debated again in 2017. She links the reluctance with which claims for apologies have been treated in Denmark to a fear of claims for compensation, but also to persistent imaginations of an "innocent colonialism" central to Danish narratives about the colonial past. Those narratives have tended to downplay violence and oppression (16f), and have instead been characterized by a trust in good intentions and the emphasis of good deeds. I will argue that those features—initial innocence and restoration of innocence—are relevant for

Gold Coast, too. One could conclude the following logic: as long as Denmark clings to the idea of a humane, innocent colonialism, there is no recognition of any debt, and thus no reason to feel guilty, to apologize, or to “repair.” Yet there is a growing number of voices both in Denmark and in the former colonies that challenge the narrative of innocent colonialism and increase the pressure to acknowledge colonial guilt and indebtedness to those still underprivileged as a consequence of European colonial expansion.¹¹

Approaching *Gold Coast*

To discuss *Gold Coast* in the framework of an exploration of colonial innocence, guilt, and obligation seems relevant not only given the context of specific national historiography, or the context of this publication. The film itself, including its production process, offers an occasion to discuss anew patterns and implications of claims of innocence, of culpability, and of the feasibility of redemption.

In what follows, I will provide a more detailed contextualization by explaining how Danish narratives of innocent colonialism have unfolded. I will ask whether such claims can be conceptualized as examples of “white innocence,” similar to Dutch discourses and practices recently analyzed by Gloria Wekker (2016). As yet another step towards a theoretical framework within which to study *Gold Coast* (and other, especially filmic, narratives of Danish innocent colonialism), I will present film historian and cultural critic Thomas Elsaesser’s model of “guilt economies” developed in his book about terror and trauma in German post-Holocaust cinema (2014). This combination of approaches allows me, then, to examine figurations of colonial guilt and innocence in *Gold Coast* pertaining to the development of the main character, issues of focalization and imagery, the depicted historical era, and the film’s production process. I will argue that the film’s treatment of colonial guilt primarily takes the form of maintenance of innocence. It thereby limits and undermines the force of challenges pitted against the narrative of an innocent colonialism.

Gold Coast is the first narrative film by writer and film director Daniel Dencik. An art house film rather than a blockbuster historical drama, *Gold Coast* did not do particularly well at the box office,¹² and received mixed reviews. The main controversy unfolded around the film’s depiction of historical circumstances. Critics accused it of lacking historical accuracy (Hansen 2016; Jensen 2015); the film however did not primarily aim at documentary accuracy, but is driven by its own aesthetic vision reflecting the last phase of Danish colonialism on the Gold Coast characterized by decline, decay, and dissolution. One

reviewer summarized the film accordingly as “anachronistic delirium” (Kristiansen 2016).¹³

Focalized through its main character, the film tells the story of the young and idealistic botanist and agriculturalist Wulff Frederik Wulff (Jakob Oftebro).¹⁴ Wulff arrives on the Danish Gold Coast in the year 1836 on order of the Danish king to establish coffee plantations. The transatlantic slave trade has officially been abolished, but not slavery itself. Only a few officials are left to administer Danish interests on the coast from Fort Christiansborg.¹⁵ Wulff is enthused by the flora and fauna, but dismayed by the decadence and corruption of his fellow countrymen, including their orgies and rape of local women. He also quickly encounters obstacles to his mission: the first plantation is destroyed by warriors of the local Asante kingdom resisting colonization of their land, and many of the Danes suffer and die from illnesses. A turning point arrives when a Danish missionary (Danica Curcic) on her deathbed urges Wulff to fight for the emancipation of the enslaved. As a next step in his maturation, Wulff witnesses a nightly illegal embarkation of a slave ship and puts together an army in order to overthrow Henrich Richter (Wakefield Ackuaku), a merchant of mixed European-African descent reigning in a former Danish fort,¹⁶ and in order to free enslaved men and women from his dungeons (Figure 1). He gets punished and imprisoned by the governor and his assistant who thereby reinstall the fragile political and economic order. At the end, the emaciated and hallucinating Wulff is rescued by his slave Lumpa (John Aggrey), in whose village he ultimately, peacefully, dies.

So, how approach *Gold Coast* from the angle of its thematization of Danish colonial guilt?

White innocence?

In her book *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (2016), Gloria Wekker offers a reading of narratives of innocence connected to

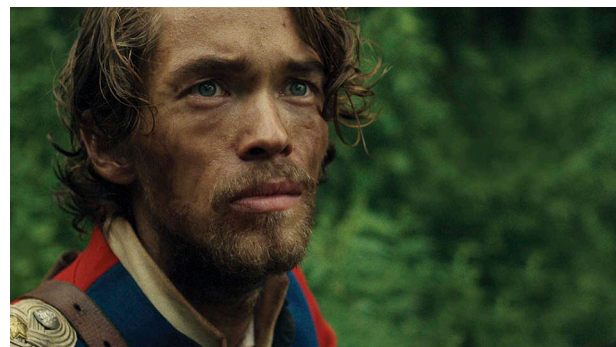


Figure 1. Wulff (Jakob Oftebro) on his mission to free captives from the dungeons of Fort Prinsensten. Photograph: Martin Munch. © Guldkysten, Haslund Dencik Entertainment.

memories and legacies of Dutch colonialism. She suggests intra-European comparisons to understand the claim of innocence as “one of the few viable stances that presents itself when the loss of empire is not worked through” (2016, 17). She mentions the Swedish case as having characteristics comparable to the Dutch, but the comparison could be extended to the Danish, or a more general Scandinavian, case. Wekker associates innocence with a list of cultural features that all resonate well with the Danish example—and, as I will argue, with *Gold Coast*: innocence as “the desired state of being” invoked in the Christian tradition, with Jesus being “the iconic innocent man”; innocence as being connected with smallness: the quantitative insignificance of a nation, or the diminished responsibility of a child; innocence as connoted with femininity, and as such with affectionate and inoffensive relations; and innocence as a position of entitlement and immunity from accusations of racism (Wekker 2016, 16f).

I recognize all aspects in discourses about Scandinavian colonialism, among them a quantitative argument about the relative insignificance of the numbers of Africans enslaved and abducted by Scandinavian slave traders; the emphasis on the smallness of colonial possessions; imaginations of friendly, familial, or even loving relations between (former) colonizers and (former) colonized; and the insistence, supported by a specific understanding of freedom of expression, on insulting language dating back to colonial race ideology as part of one’s culture. The claim of innocence, according to Wekker, “contains not-knowing, but also not wanting to know” (Wekker 2016, 17), and as such is part of what I would describe as privilege of ignorance. Claims of innocence should thus not be mistaken for harmlessness, Wekker writes, and a loss of innocence does not always lead to acknowledgement, remorse, and guilt, but can instead unleash new racist violence. Wekker’s book is therefore “concerned with the question of how innocence is accomplished and maintained” (2016, 18). Likewise, my aim with the analysis of *Gold Coast* is to investigate the *making of* innocence within an “economy of guilt,” and claims of innocence that might in fact mask ignorance and indifference.

Guilt economies of perpetrator nations

Another important inspiration for my sketch of a guilt economy at work in the Danish present has been film historian Thomas Elsaesser’s *Terror and Trauma* about the memory and legacy of the Holocaust in German cinema since 1945. What is most important for me here is his conceptualization of “perpetrator legacy” (2014, 20) as a cultural, affective, and economic residue of historical wrongs. What Elsaesser does is to re-

frame the affective and psychological dimension of guilt in economic terms, and link them to modes of representation and spectatorship. A model of guilt economy could, in short, be described as follows: extreme wrongdoings and power imbalances create debt, and as affective reaction guilt. (Futile) efforts are then made to “balance the account,” to reach closure; such attempts could include apologies, atonement, redemption, or reconciliation.¹⁷ In cases such as the Holocaust or slavery, the account can never be balanced (2014, 293). Elsaesser suggests, therefore, to investigate perpetrator legacy as “a matter of ‘managing (the symptoms of) guilt’” (2014, 21), including the inevitable failures—which he theorizes as “parapractic” politics and poetics¹⁸—produced by the attempts to master the past. In this performative understanding, film, as “cinematic memory work” (2014, 81), is an excellent source for the study of how guilt is acknowledged, denied, diverted, managed—or perpetuated.

My impression of a particular Danish economy of colonial guilt is that it is characterized by two interconnected factors: the reluctance—supported by the idea of innocent colonialism—to acknowledge accountability, guilt, or debt; and the privileged position—acquired not least during the era of colonialism and turned into a sense of entitlement—in a global capitalist world order. The latter privilege includes the privilege to decide whether to apologize or not, whether violence of the past is deemed relevant for the present, whether to remedy ignorance about the former colonies or not, and whether to admit challenges to the national narrative of innocent colonialism upheld by the white majority. In other words, there is no generally accepted acknowledgement of a perpetrator position in Denmark to begin with, and one can still see the discussion of guilt dominated by the maintenance or preservation of innocence (often represented by expressions such as “But it is not my fault,” “It wasn’t me,” or, when referring to present events and behavior, “I had no idea.”¹⁹). I argue that these particular tendencies in the management of colonial guilt unfold in *Gold Coast*, too.

A Danish dream of innocent colonialism: *Gold Coast* and the management of colonial guilt

The film’s subtitle on the Danish official website and poster is “A Danish dream.”²⁰ The dream theme—intertwining plot, focalization, imagery and aesthetics—can be read as a key to understand the film’s treatment of guilt and innocence.

The film’s central plot revolves around issues of guilt and atonement as it follows the main character’s development from innocent accomplice of the colonial system to militant critic of slavery and ultimately depicts his death, staged as that of a martyr’s (caused

by his Danish peers striving to uphold the colonial order). Wulff's dream is a dream of colonization in the sense of peaceful and fruitful cultivation of the land. His loss of innocence and maturation result from his acknowledgement of the collective guilt Europeans have brought upon themselves by trading with human beings; a collective guilt that he can be said to atone for through his struggle and ultimate death.

However, Wulff's experiences are depicted not as a rational assessment of the situation, but as the affective, physical and mental reactions of a naïve young man. The images describing Wulff's experience are dominated by "exceptional states": extreme heat and humidity, dreams, flashbacks, intoxication, ecstasy, delirium, homesickness, and fever hallucinations. Wulff's mental and physical breakdown reflects the dissolution and decay of the colonial system. The film thus describes how the dream of innocent colonialism turns into a nightmare for all involved. The air of dream and trance (supported by the electronic original score by Angelo Badalamenti) however results in reduced accountability, appropriately described by the critic John Frederik Kristiansen (2016) as "anachronistic delirium": the film's depiction of colonialism stresses its character as fantasy rather than historical reality, based on conscious choice and political will.

The centeredness on the perspective of a white man, and the silence of African characters in the film, have been criticized by among others by scholars Lene Myong and Mathias Danbolt in articles for Danish newspaper *Politiken* (Danbolt and Myong 2015a) and the blog peculiar.dk (Danbolt and Myong 2015b). Dencik's reaction to the criticism is quoted in another *Politiken* article: "The film is Wulff's story. I am not trying to show a palette of all voices" (Winther 2015a).²¹ This concentration on the protagonist's point of view, the fact that most of the action takes place "inside his head" (Bové 2015), is told in the form of flashbacks and hallucinations, and is accompanied by reflections in Wulff's letters to his fiancé in Denmark, has consequences for different readings of the film, and for the film's production and restoration of innocence.

One consequence of the film's focalization is that the audience shares the protagonist's status of knowledge and information regarding his country's colonial enterprise on the African continent. The extradiegetic music contributes to the sense of foreboding that Wulff's mission, as *pars pro toto* of the entire endeavor, is doomed to fail. As no other perspective is directly represented, we share Wulff's slow learning of the truth, and witness his maturation and development from naïve and idealistic supporter of the idea of colonization—in the sense of cultivation—to radical abolitionist. In so doing, the film supports the

idea of initial innocence and well-meaning central to the imagination of "innocent colonialism."

The second central idea behind the imagination of Danish "innocent colonialism" is good deeds: the idea that Denmark's colonial history is to a large degree driven by opposition to the very same political and social order it establishes, and by selfless actions of individuals.²² Within an economy of guilt, such good deeds can be understood to equate atonement, and the restoration of innocence. This is reflected by *Gold Coast*, too, not least on the level of the film's imagery and symbolism.

The film employs Christian symbolism to negotiate innocence, guilt, and atonement: colonialism and slavery are directly linked to imaginations of the original sin. In one scene depicting an orgy behind the thick walls of Fort Christiansborg, a snake is seen wiggling on a dining table between overthrown glasses of red wine and the naked bodies of black women being raped by the Danish officials. The protagonist is exempt from such excess and abuse. The film juxtaposes such images of the Fall of Man with images of purification and salvation embodied by the main character.

One source of purification is Wulff's angelic fiancé Eleonora (Luise Skov) in Denmark. The love scenes are told as flashbacks or hallucinations, as dreams of pure innocent desire and faithfulness in contrast with the "dark" desires of his corrupt peers and nightmarish experiences in the dungeon. The contrast between light and darkness has a racial dimension.²³ The fiancé's whiteness is emphasized by the (non-) color white dominating the *mise-en-scène* of the love scenes: her skin, clothes and gloves, bed linen and curtains—both interiors and landscapes—appear as veiled in white lace, and the lovers are enveloped in a halo of sunrays (Figure 2). Interracial and polygamous sexuality is depicted as a destructive force in *Gold Coast*, linked to individual and collective decay, whereas Wulff's visions of his fiancé, transcending the violent reality of slavery and his own physical and mental breakdown in the dungeon, represent domesticity, reproductivity, and health.

The final attempt at atonement is Wulff's death, staged in the film as a martyr's death. His torment

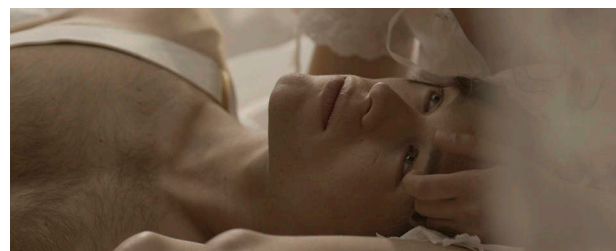


Figure 2. Wulff (Jakob Oftebro) in Denmark with his fiancé Eleonora (Louise Skov). Photograph: Martin Munch. © Guldysten, Haslund Dencik Entertainment.

receives much attention in the film, manifested in the many close-ups of his face and body and the shots of his naked emaciated torso in the last half hour of the film.²⁴ The images of suffering and humiliation might be read as counter-images to traditional concepts of masculinity. However, scholars have pointed to “crises of masculinity” as a recurring motif that does not necessarily correspond to real losses of power and privileges, but, quite the contrary, supports the re-centering and privileging of a male point of view (von Schnurbein 2001; Yekani 2011).

Wulff fails in his original mission of cultivating the land, and in his resistance to the slave trade, and pays for the latter with his life. Still, the white male body occupies center stage of large parts of the film. Wulff’s death and funeral resemble the “transcendent moment” Mary Louise Pratt, in her influential study *Imperial Eyes*, recognizes in the travelogue of Mungo Park (*Travels in the Interior of Africa*, 1860). Park emerges from his travels across Africa with nothing in behold but his innocence and authenticity. Both Park, in his travelogue, and Wulff, in *Gold Coast*, might be understood as epitomes of “the naked, essential, inherently powerful white man” (Pratt 2008, 79). What is more, many images of Wulff’s dying and dead body resemble the visual tradition of depictions of the martyrdom of Christ (Figure 3). Wulff’s struggle is thus symbolically and visually linked to the most prominent male martyr and savior figure in Christian culture. The white male naked body in *Gold Coast* can be read allegorically as manifestation and embodiment of Danish colonial sin, and as its atoning sacrifice.²⁵ A “Danish dream” turns into the Christian myth of innocence and salvation, or vice versa.

Taking the allegorical reading of *Gold Coast* one step further, Wulff’s fate could be understood to represent the failing Danish dream of Empire; a

dream that, when remembered, turns ambivalently into a haunting nightmare, or into nostalgia, and pride.²⁶ Indeed, Gloria Wekker interprets claims of innocence as colonial melancholia: as a reaction to a loss of Empire that is not yet worked through (Wekker 2016, 17). In Thomas Elsaesser’s words: Despite claims of initial innocence, and of a restoration of innocence, an “undead,” often unconscious residue of historical wrongs remains, manifesting itself in a “perpetually returning past” (Elsaesser 2014, 4).

Innocent colonialism in the final decade of the danish Gold Coast

In the following sections I will discuss the implications of the choice of depicted epoch, and of the main character’s profession, for narratives of innocent colonialism.

Gold Coast is set in the 1830s, representing the decade in the middle of the time period between Denmark’s abolition of the legal transatlantic slave trade in 1803 and the abolition of slavery in 1848. Recent research refers to this period as the third stage of the Danish utilization of their territory in West Africa. After periods of predominant gold trade and slave trade (1658–1690 and 1690–1803 respectively), this last stage is characterized by attempts at plantation economy, reflecting the search for “new, more humane, sources of income”²⁷ (see the page “Frederiksgaves historie” on the Danish National Museum’s website²⁸ and Bredwa-Mensah, Justesen, and Jørgensen 2007). None of the altogether 15 plantations however gave good returns, which ultimately led to the handover of the remaining possessions to Britain in 1850. The trade with humans continued illegally after it was officially abolished, and the plantations were run with slave labor.

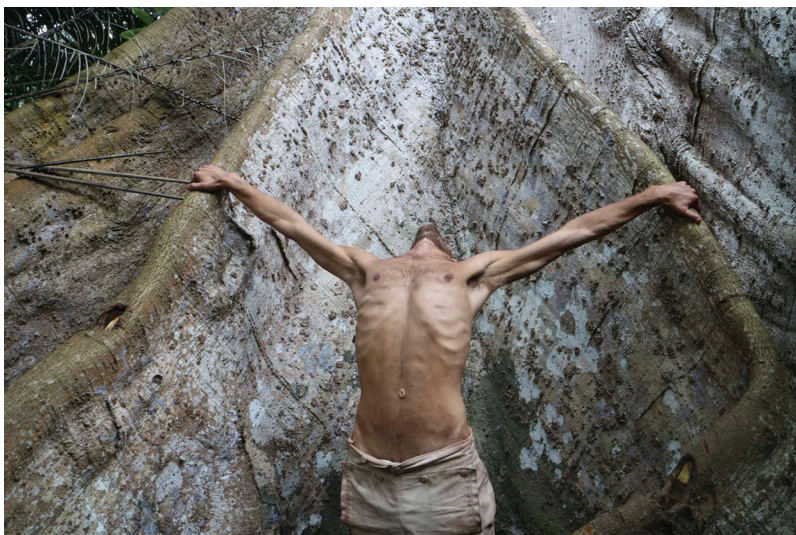


Figure 3. The torment of Wulff (Jakob Oftebro). Photograph: Michael Haslund. © Guldkysten, Haslund Dencik Entertainment.



Figure 4. Wulff (Jakob Oftebro) and his adversary, assistant (later governor) Dall (Anders Heinrichsen). Photograph: Martin Munch. © Guldkysten, Haslund Dencik Entertainment.

Gold Coast reflects the conditions and challenges of this particular phase of the Danish colonial administration, mainly by referring to the end of the legal slave trade and to the establishment of plantations. Wulff is horrified when he realizes that enslaved people are still traded on and shipped from the coast. His fellow countrymen officially acknowledge the King’s policy (in one scene, the governor cites the decree over the abolishment of slave trade by heart), but obviously facilitate the trade and participate in its revenues. *Gold Coast* turns the conflict between the policy and ideology of the metropolitan center and the *realpolitik* in the colony into an issue of morality and guilt by contrasting Wulff’s innocence, idealism, and remorse with the other officials’ ruthlessness.

In the fatal conflict between Wulff and the Danish officials, the film merges two phases of and attitudes towards colonialism: on the one hand a critique of slavery and belief in progress, fruitfulness and a “more humane” utilization of the territory, and on the other hand a cynical recognition of the imminent

end of the Danish colonial endeavor and its inherent violence, corruption, and death. To set *Gold Coast* in the 1830s enables the film to separate abolitionists from slavers among the Danish characters, and to shape the main character as bearer of the idea of innocent colonialism (Figure 4).

The choice of a botanist and agriculturalist as the main character of *Gold Coast* also has implications for the film’s negotiation of Danish colonial guilt and the maintenance of innocence. In *Imperial Eyes*, Mary Louise Pratt discusses the botanist and the agriculturalist as two types under her category of figures of “anti-conquest.” In the travel literature examined by Pratt, “anticonquerors” (Pratt 2008, 224–5) represent ways of “taking possession without subjugation and violence” (56), and embody a “claim to the innocent pursuit of knowledge” (81). Yet they belong to and invoke the same colonial logic as their aggressive counterparts. As enthusiastic botanist, Wulff represents the colonial practices of “discovery,” naming, systematizing and collecting (Figure 5).²⁹ Apart from



Figure 5. Wulff (Jakob Oftebro) and one of his adversaries, assistant Herbst (Adam Ild Rohweder) on their way to Fort Prinsensten. This image contrasts Herbst—carried by slaves and disinterested in his surroundings—as typical colonizer with Wulff—walking and alert—as enthused botanist and proponent of egalitarianism. Photograph: Michael Haslund. © Guldkysten, Haslund Dencik Entertainment.

his botanical interests, his mission is to lay out the land for cultivation. He thus represents colonization in its original sense (from Latin “colere,” to cultivate or till) associated with peaceful utilization of land. His colonization of the land for the plantation is conceptualized as help and improvement, not as aggressive appropriation. Wulff, depicted as innocent, naïve and vulnerable, reminds us of the “victim-hero” figures, identified by Pratt in travelogues of the 18th and 19th centuries, who endure hardships at the imperial frontier (Pratt 2008, 85). He experiences the loss of his first plantation and betrayal by his countrymen who conspire with the local rulers behind his back. In both instances, he represents a singular counterpart to the aggressive masculinity of Africans (Asante warriors destroying the plantation) and Europeans (Danish officials who abuse and rape).

Other elements contribute to the shaping of the main character’s innocence. An image of his naked body in a fetal position cuddled between tree roots emphasizes his regression to a state of childlike innocence and connection to natural processes. Gloria Wekker mentions among associations with innocence the authenticity, smallness, and diminished responsibility of a child (Wekker 2016, 16), and qualities associated with femininity (or, importantly, contemporary Scandinavian masculinity) such as vulnerability and emotionality, affectionate and inoffensive relations (17). Wulff carries such qualities, too: in contrast to all other male characters, he cries, shivers with fright, and treats humans, animals, and plants equally and tenderly. A third innocence-bearing figure from those listed by Wekker is alluded to in the characterization of Wulff: Jesus, as “the iconic innocent man,” who embodies salvation from guilt and restoration of innocence (16). The fact that Wulff is naked or half-naked for large parts of the film associates the character clearly with imaginations of a natural, innocent, state.

According to Pratt, the anticonqueror character’s sentiment and idealism are not negations of, but a complement to aggressive appropriation. She argues that “the conspicuous innocence of the naturalist . . . acquires meaning in relation to an assumed guilt of conquest” (Pratt 2008, 56). The character constellation in *Gold Coast* corresponds with this pattern. Within the film’s guilt economy, the guilt of aggressive conquest is balanced, and atoned for. The film employs too many distancing devices to establish empathy or identification with the main character. I still want to argue that the film contributes to maintaining the idea of innocent colonialism, as what remains central among the horrors of colonial aggression is the image of a colonialist as victim and as innocent and benevolent. This corresponds with Astrid Nonbo Andersen’s argument that it would be misleading to state a collective loss of the memory.

Instead, the making and maintenance of Danish innocence has been so dominant as to render the impact of colonialism—elsewhere, on Danish self-perception, and on post-colonial relations—almost impossible to decode (2017, 33). This pattern, and two main components of narratives of innocent colonialism are maintained in *Gold Coast*: among regrettable events, there is initial intrinsic innocence, and there are good deeds (that Wulff’s actions are non-sensical and a failure is, for that matter, no deviation from the principle of other narratives).

Neo-colonial culpability? innocence and entitlement

One striking feature of *Gold Coast* is the silence of African characters, and I will in this last section turn to the question of whether and how this silence can be linked to the topic of making and maintaining innocence. I have described, in the previous sections, how narrative (the focus on the main character’s development), narration (focalization through the main character, and his letters home as voice-over), and aesthetic choices (perception being filtered through the main character’s feverish state) contribute to center *Gold Coast* on the experience of the white male Danish main character, Wulff. The comparative silence of minor characters is justified within this logic (all other Danish characters however do have speaking parts, in contrast to all “natives”).

Also, the African characters’ silence in *Gold Coast* can—and has been—understood as a powerful tool to point at power (im)balances and the impossibility of communication in a colonial setting (however, it is not only “slaves” who do not speak, but also the characters who turn out to be the Danes’ partners in conspiracy and trade). Katrine Hornstrup Yde interprets the silence of Africans as the film’s most thought-provoking and self-reflexive moment in her debate article in *Information* (Yde 2015), “The silence of minorities is damn political”: “It is a sour image of not wanting to listen, to penetrate the foreign and exotic with their own agenda and interpretation . . . it exposes the white man’s tunnel view.”³⁰ The silence of some is thus the result of others’ entitlement to speak.

The question is where to locate *Gold Coast* on the fine line between thematizing the complementary silence and entitlement, and reproducing it. The more I have read and heard Ghanaian perspectives, and those of Danes of Color, and reports from “behind the scenes,” the more I tend to see the silence of Africans in the film not only as part of an artistic decision, but as the result of processes of silencing—intended or unintended—that trace back to casting, production, and post-production.³¹ I want to argue that what can be witnessed here is yet another form of making and maintaining innocence; namely when innocence takes

the shape of a position of entitlement that, at worst, can be aggressively enforced. Entitlement, in the sense formulated by Gloria Wekker (2016, 16f and 170f), is closely related to a sanctioning of ignorance, indifference, and immunity from criticism. In *Gold Coast*, the alleged innocence of an artistic and aesthetic vision entails the entitlement to choose which and whose story to tell in which way (art film allowing for an extra amount of freedom, also from historical accuracy), and whose perspectives to represent—in short, who gets to speak. And these are, in the case of *Gold Coast*, ultimately, white people.

One of the mute characters in *Gold Coast* is Wulff's slave, Lumpa. Upon arrival on the coast, Wulff believes him (and all other natives) to be mute, deaf, and primitive, but a friendship develops between them. Lumpa becomes Wulff's closest companion and in the end saves him from the dungeon and takes him back to his village to be taken care of and buried. Only there, among his people, does Lumpa start to speak. What he says is not subtitled, nor is his native language mentioned in any Danish source about the film. I only learned from an excellent blog review by Ghanaian-British writer Kirsty Osei-Bempong that it is the Akan language Twi (Osei-Bempong 2015a)—one of the major languages of Ghana, spoken by half the population. What is more, the (in the Danish sources hardly ever mentioned) Ghanaian co-producer Kwame Boadi relates in an interview with Osei-Bempong that he had initially suggested a Ghanaian TV star for the role as Lumpa to support commercial viability for the film in Ghana, but the slave's age was later changed in the script to a younger boy (Osei-Bempong 2015b).

Director Daniel Dencik mentions in an interview that a scene had been shot where Wulff whips Lumpa. The scene was later removed (Kamp 2015).³² One interpretation of Lumpa's silence could be that the two understand each other without words, across skin color, age, and social status, despite the circumstances (Figure 6). In

terms of an economy of colonial guilt within the film, the friendship between master and slave is an obvious guilt-relieving strategy, a fantasy of reconciliation. It is likewise a measurement to make and maintain Wulff's innocence. The slave's muteness prevents contradiction, or resistance; instead, his character wordlessly supports the main character's exceptional benevolence.

According to the production announcement, the film was first planned to include a love story between Wulff and a "slave girl" assisting him in his struggle against the illegal slave trade.³³ For the role of "Tim-Tam,"³⁴ then 18-year-old Danish-Togolese actress Sophia Adegnika was cast. According to official information, she fell ill during the shooting of the film in Ghana (Lindberg 2015). It remains unclear why the production team decided against casting a Ghanaian actress to replace her; it seems to have been important that the only language spoken in the film was Danish. As a consequence, the film had to be changed and the script re-written, with consequences not only for plot and genre, but also for the representation of Danish colonial history and race relations. The film lost one black character and speaking part.

Another actor quit, shortly before departure to the film shooting in Ghana: Actor and politician Roger Matthisen had agreed to play the aforementioned Henrich Richter (see footnote 16), a complex historical figure of Euro-African descent. Roger Matthisen told me that when he read the final version of the script he realized that the character had only very limited agency, and that instead of representing the complex Afro-Danish history, he would, by participating, support a narrative based on white national majority perspectives. He was replaced, at the last minute, by Ghanaian actor and director Wakefield Ackuaku. Due to the decision to film entirely in Danish, this character is mute, too.

According to William Nsuiban Gmayi from the Ghana Museums and Monuments Board (GMMB),



Figure 6. Wulff (Jacob Oftebro) and Lumpa (John Aggrey). Photograph: Michael Haslund. © Guldkysten, Haslund Dencik Entertainment.

the *Gold Coast* production team had approached the GMMB for permission to film at facilities administered by the Board. The Board required a review of the film script and then recommended and offered assistance with research. The production team did not return to the GMMB, and to Gmayi's best knowledge, no experts on Danish colonialism in Ghana were contacted or contributed to the content of the production.

As a result of these decisions underway, no Afro-Danish actors are present in the film and there are no speaking parts for black actors. The newspaper *Politiken* contacted Ghana's minister for culture and tourism Abla Dzifa Gomashie who mentions conversations with the production team. He voices his surprise that the black characters have so few lines, and that the film would risk that local perspectives on the shared history remain untold (Winther 2015b). Also, to this day, Ghanaians have only limited access to the film. Co-producer Kwame Boadi voices his wish to cut a shorter version of the film to adapt it to the Ghanaian market (Osei-Bempong 2015b). To my knowledge, this has not happened so far, and the film has not been released anywhere in Africa. Except for on DVD, it is currently only available on Danish iTunes. No copies with English subtitles were shown upon release in Danish cinemas.³⁵ The overall impression is that the readiness to listen, learn, and share, has been limited.

The Danish Gold Coast and Fort Christiansborg are represented as more monolingually Danish, less cosmopolitan and more isolated than they were in reality. The complexity of characters, especially of those for whom rich source material exists, has been reduced so as to create clearer constellations of good and bad, innocent and evil, African and European, black and white—with the main objective to create, with the character, a “quintessential hero” (Osei-Bempong 2015a). The ensuing focus on the main character's development and point of view privileges a narrative based on a white national majority perspective, and contributes to shape an understanding of white innocence and benevolence.

When seen from the point of view of those whose perspectives were excluded, the production process can be said to reflect the film's narrative and narration insofar as it was based on the same premises and privileges. The entitlement to own the story, and the enforcement of the artistic vision, seem to have led to disrespect and power abuse. In an interview for BT (the web portal of *Berlingske*), director Dencik explains his method of creating authenticity during the film shooting: “I unconsciously saw to it that I was surrounded by children and animals. I want it to be as spontaneous and real as possible. Because when children get afraid, they really get afraid. The same with animals” (Seeberg 2015).³⁶ In another interview, for *Filmmagasinet Ekko*, Dencik relates how he created “a spontaneous hell in the jungle”: “I did not instruct the

extras, because they were not supposed to be prepared. They were not supposed to have a pleasant day with cake and coffee, but to be naked and slaves. It was supposed to be hell” (Kamp 2015).³⁷

Astrid Nonbo Andersen explains in *Ingen undskyldning* the historical circumstances leading to the fact that Denmark's positive narrative of colonialism could remain unchallenged for so long (54–8). In short, this is due to the absence of voices from the colonies, or rather, the unwillingness to listen. It seems to be generally accepted, by the reporters, many reviewers, and the director himself, that *Gold Coast* contributes to changing the narrative of “innocent colonialism,” and to educating the public. The film acknowledges the atrocities of colonialism and slavery. But it insists on the sovereignty of interpretation of a shared and messy history from a national, majority, and gendered perspective.

A closer look at the film's production process reveals that at least two aspects of what innocence might entail, and which impact the claim of innocence might have, get overseen when the focus is limited to the film's exposure of historical brutality, and to the acknowledgement of guilt incurred in the past. First, there is the premise of benevolence: the presumption of well-meaning and harmlessness of the film making endeavor. Intertwined with the premise of good intentions is, second, entitlement, and the inherent privilege of not knowing and not wanting to know, or to decide whether and what to know. Part of the performance of innocence in the making of *Gold Coast* is the insistence on an artistic vision and method (authenticity, raw realism, improvisation) that disguises, accepts, or even celebrates, ignorance. Gloria Wekker summarizes how the “(l)oss of innocence,”—here, the acknowledgement of colonial atrocities—“does not automatically entail guilt, repentance, restitution, recognition, responsibility, and solidarity but . . . often results in the cover-up of structural racism” (Wekker 2016, 18).

Guilty or not guilty

I am still struggling to come to terms with *Gold Coast*. When I first saw the film, and tried to write about it, my primary affect was indignation. The initial indignation has since given way to more ambivalent feelings, and to a process of self-reflection that indeed risked the completion of this text. So I will try, in place of a conclusion, to address my own affective ambivalence as a spectator, and connect it to the ambivalence I recognize in the film: an ambivalence in terms of Denmark's coming to term with its colonial past, an ambivalence that could be described as shifting between acknowledgement and mitigation of colonial guilt. I strongly suspect that those two sets of affects—my own reactions, and a perpetrator

nation's reaction when confronted with the memory and legacy of colonialism—are somehow connected.

Interestingly, intense affective reactions to *Gold Coast* include also those who have *not* seen the film. I spent the fall of 2017 in Copenhagen to study the centennial commemoration of the transfer of the former Danish West Indies, today's Virgin Islands, to the United States. I used the opportunity to ask my conversation partners who share my interest in colonialism and its aftermaths if they had seen the film, and what they thought about it. I heard so many people say—particularly those who, like myself, are dedicated to changing the narratives about colonial history—that they have not seen the film, do not want to see the film, stopped watching, have heard awful things, that it would be unbearable to see the film. Our reaction to *Gold Coast* can be understood, I believe, even independent of the film's qualities and failures.

The reactions point to the fact emphasized by Thomas Elsaesser, namely that the (potential) spectator is not at all exempt of, but deeply involved in “guilt management.” The processing of colonial guilt is not reserved for representations of colonialism, but shifts back and forth between them, and us. I cannot be indifferent to a film that is potentially so important, cannot be indifferent to its failures, nor to my failure to adequately describe what is at stake. The reactions, I conclude, point to the ethics involved in the endeavor to represent past and present relations to a former colony; an ethics that, if disregarded, makes impossible an assessment of the film solely on the basis of the assumption of artistic freedom.

Notes

1. Another example, that would lend itself to comparison, is Palle Kjærulff-Schmidt's *Peter von Scholten* (1987), about the last Danish governor general of the Danish West Indies.
2. Denmark (which until 1814 comprised Norway) held possessions on the coast of Guinea between 1658 and 1850. The territory was limited to altogether ten forts as trading bases, and, at a later stage, plantations in the inland. The trading bases of the Danish Gold Coast were part of the system of the transatlantic triangular trade; an approximate number of 100,000 abducted and enslaved people were transported on the so-called middle passage from the Danish forts to the Caribbean, most of them to the Danish West Indies, to work on sugarcane plantations. From 1617, the territory was administered by the newly founded Danish West India-Guinea Company, before it was converted into a Crown Colony in 1750 and sold to Britain in 1850. Ghana gained independence in 1957.
3. Among other examples are Amanda Kernell's *Sami Blood* (*Sameblod*, 2016) about racial discrimination against the Sámi, the indigenous population of northern Scandinavia, or Louise Friberg's *The*

Experiment (*Eksperimentet*, 2010) about Danification policies affecting Greenlandic children.

4. Some of the most important exhibitions have been “Blinde vinkler: Billeder af kolonien Dansk Vestindien” (Blind Spots: Images of the Danish West Indies Colony) at The Royal Danish Library (accompanied by the international conference “Unfinished Histories: Art, Memory, and the Visual Politics of Coloniality,” November 30–December 1 at The Royal Danish Library and the University of Copenhagen); “Stop slaveri!” (Stop Slavery!) at the Workers Museum in Copenhagen; and “Kolonihistorier: Magt og afmagt” (Colonial Histories: Power and Powerlessness) at the art gallery Gl. Holtegaard. The National Museum in Copenhagen opened a new permanent exhibition of its collection of artefacts from the former Danish colonies with the title “Stemmer fra kolonierne” (Voices from the Colonies). The independent news site Point of View International (POV) updated throughout the year a calendar with all events concerning the centennial commemoration: <http://pov.international/povs-dansk-vestindien-kalender-november-december/> (accessed 26 January 2018).
5. Among the groups and organizations campaigning for reparations for native genocide and slavery are CARICOM (Caribbean Community) and, in the US Virgin Islands, ACRRA (African-Caribbean Reparations and Resettlement Alliance). The spokesperson of ACRRA, Shelley Moorhead, has visited Denmark several times in 2017 to attend meetings with members of parliament and to speak at public events. Also see Nonbo Andersen (2014).
6. The phrasing was used by Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen in a speech on the occasion of a memorial event on 31 March 2017 in Christiansted, St. Croix (http://www.stm.dk/_p_14497.html; accessed 26 January 2018). The refusal of an official apology to the Virgin Islands has been met with criticism and frustration by those, on both sides of the Atlantic, who feel that an apology could facilitate healing and future collaboration, and that an occasion to learn and listen is spoiled when the debate's energy is focused on justification and denial.
7. See Aas and Vestgården (2014), Ahmed (2014) (especially the chapter “Shame Before Others”), and the anthology *Skandinaviske fortællinger om skyld og privilegier i en globaliseringstid* (Oxfeldt 2016) for explorations of shame and guilt as primary collective affects when a nation's coming to terms with its past and privileged present is concerned.
8. In an interview with TV 2, she put it as follows: “Det er ikke et kønt kapitel, men det var jo, hvad man gjorde rundt omkring—og det gjorde de fleste af de europæiske nationer. I hvert fald alle dem med en stor flåde, fordi man havde oversøiske besiddelser og gerne ville have folk til at drive dem, og det var så slaver” (It is not a pretty chapter, but it was what one did all around—and what most of the European nations did. At least those with a big fleet, because one had overseas possessions and wanted people to work them, and those were slaves). See <http://nyheder.tv2.dk/samfund/2017-11-23-dronning-margrethe-om-dansk-slavehandel-det-er-ikke-et-koent-kapitel> (accessed 26 January 2018).
9. See Samuelsen's speech on Ghanaian television on 24 November 2017: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DF5xBsITFMg> (accessed 26 January 2018).

10. See for example the report on Ghanaian radio station Citi FM: <http://citifmonline.com/2017/11/24/denmark-apologizes-to-ghana-for-role-in-slave-trade/> (accessed 26 January 2018).
11. Among the most prolific representatives of a movement to change Danish narratives and practices related to colonialism and racism past and present are the activist collective *Marronage*, Danish-Trinidadian visual artist Jeannette Ehlers and St. Croix-based visual artist La Vaughn Belle. Also with regard to Greenland, the decolonization movement has been influenced by visual artists such as Pia Arke and Julie Edel Hardenberg. The Greenlandic government established a Reconciliation Commission (2014–17) to analyze the aftermaths of Danish colonial rule. Denmark chose not to take part in the Commission's work.
12. The film sold around 73,000 tickets in Denmark, which is a relatively low number compared to other feature films (place 17 out of 24 feature films that received funding from the Danish Film Institute in 2015), but a very high number for a Danish art-house film. See <http://www.dfi.dk/Tal-og-fakta/Billetsalg/Billetsalg-for-danske-film-2015.aspx> (accessed 26 January 2018).
13. Unless otherwise marked, translations into English are my own.
14. The main character has several historical models, the most obvious of which is Wulff Joseph Wulff (1809–1842), a commercial assistant from Randers who served at Fort Christiansborg between 1836 and his death from a tropical disease. His diary and letters to his parents and brother are among the few individual sources on Danish life on the Gold Coast (Wulff 1917; Wulff 2004). Two remarkable aspects of his life are not mentioned in the film: that he was married to a local woman from the Ga tribe and founded a family of which members still live (also see footnote 34), and that he was Jewish. He owned slaves, and bequeathed them to his wife.
15. Fort Christiansborg was in Danish possession between 1658 and 1850, with the exception of a few years under Portuguese and Akwamu rule. Christiansborg Castle became the capital of the Danish Gold Coast in 1685 and has been the seat of the Ghanaian government and presidential palace since independence and until recently. The castle, today known by Osu Castle, is currently being converted into a museum. Most of the film was shot at Cape Coast and Elmina castles instead.
16. The character's historical model, Henrich Richter (1785–1849), descended from a Danish official and merchant on the Gold Coast and his Euro-African wife. He became a very influential and wealthy merchant and skillful politician at the Coast, with more employees, "serfs" and slaves than Fort Christiansborg, and more soldiers to equip military expeditions than the Danish administration. There is however no evidence that he participated directly in the transatlantic slave trade (Justesen 2003).
17. The inner coherence of the guilt economy model is even easier to grasp in German (Elsaesser's native language), where the affective and economic dimensions of guilt are also linguistically related: Schuld (guilt), Schulden (debt), Unschuld (innocence), Entschuldigung (apology), Entschuldung (debt relief). The complex can also be described in the Scandinavian languages with words from one linguistic family, except that Danish and Norwegian use a different word for debt (gæld/gjeld).
18. The German notion, first theorized by Freud, would be "Fehlleistung," translated as failed performance or performance of failure (cf. Elsaesser 2014, 8f).
19. Elsaesser emphasizes the significance of guilt as a political issue that cannot "be left to individual conscience" (2014, 22). Guilt management thus refers to guilt as private, personal and individual responsibility and affect on the one hand, and to guilt as an issue of collective and official accountability on the other. Overlaps, frictions and confusions between the two occur often, for instance when the question of official apologies is mistaken for an expression of more or less spontaneous regret and compassion rather than correctly understood as diplomatic tool.
20. "En dansk drøm," <http://guldskysten.com> (accessed 26 January 2018).
21. "Filmen er jo Wulffs fortælling. Jeg prøver ikke at lave en palet af alle stemmer."
22. Astrid Nonbo Andersen mentions two prominent examples of Danish historiography that have shaped the narrative of innocent colonialism: the national myth about pioneering abolition (2017, 52f), and the emphasis on governor general Peter von Scholten as hero in the struggle for the liberation of enslaved people in the Danish West Indies (108–11).
23. For the symbolic meaning of black and white (clothing) in the film, see Osei-Bempong (2015a, 2015b).
24. The focus on the male protagonist and his body is also due to the film's centeredness on the leading actor Jakob Oftebro, who is an up-and-coming star of Scandinavian cinema, theater and tv series. Many reviews consequently remarked on the actor's weight loss for the role (Kastrup 2015; Nordseth 2015). Oftebro is Norwegian, which is probably one reason why the film was released in Norway as the only other country besides Denmark. The Norwegian reception was in all more positive (see, for instance, Rogne 2016). Perhaps this is due to the fact that the contribution of Norwegians to Danish colonialism (as Norway was part of the Kingdom of Denmark until 1814) is seldom recognized and the legacy of colonialism less contested in Norway.
25. The staging of the main character as martyr, as well as many other elements of Wulff's characterization in the film, suggest a reading of *Gold Coast* as an example of a "white-savior" film. Such films address struggles related to race- and ethnicity-based inequality and oppression such as segregation and slavery, yet center the narrative on a white character who fights for and comes to the rescue of people of color. According to Matthew Hughey (2014), the trope can be understood as reflecting a desire to redeem, repair, and reconcile with, the wrongs brought about by ideologies and political systems supporting white supremacy. White-savior narratives can thus be directly linked to the guilt management of perpetrator collectives. For a discussion of *Gold Coast* as a white-savior film, see Danbolt and Myong (2015a).
26. For an example of a discourse where nostalgia and pride dominate guilt, see Körber (Forthcoming) about tourism to former colonies.
27. "nye, mere humane, indtægtskilder".

28. See the webpages of the National Museum's research project "Ghana Initiative" (2004–10): <https://natmus.dk/historisk-viden/forskning/forskningsprojekter/ghana-initiativet/frederiksgaves-historie/> (accessed 26 January 2018).
29. In one of his letters to his fiancé, he states that he aims to continue the work of Swedish botanist Carl von Linné (1707–78). Linné is famous for his introduction of a system of scientific classification of flora and fauna. Less known is the fact that he extended his system of classification to human races. He thus contributed to the scientific fundament of the race ideology utilized to justify European imperialism and white supremacy since the Enlightenment. See Pratt (2008, 24–36).
30. "Minoritetens tavshed er møgpolitisk," "Den er et syret billede på ikke at ville lytte, at penetrere det fremmede og eksotiske med egen agenda og fortolkning . . . den udstiller den hvide mands tunnelsyn."
31. The following paragraphs are partly based on informal conversations I have had in Copenhagen during the fall of 2017. The most important contributions of conversation partners that I paraphrase here are authorized by them. I am highly indebted to William Nsuiban Gmayi, Roger Matthisen, and Ida Maria Skielboe for sharing their knowledge, and their help. I am also very grateful that I had the opportunity to present and discuss an earlier version of this text at the conference "Unfinished Histories: Art, Memory, and the Visual Politics of Coloniality" in Copenhagen 2017: thanks to the organizers, especially to Mathias Danbolt.
32. In general, Wulff's fair and friendly treatment of Africans is modelled onto one important source for Danish colonial history on the Gold Coast, the enlightenment thinker, botanist and royal surgeon Paul Erdmann Isert. Isert (1756–89) was a German physician and botanist in Danish service on the Gold Coast as Royal chief surgeon. Isert's travelogues and letters from his journey along the triangular route of the Danish transatlantic trade were first published in 1790, and they are among the most important sources for Danish colonial history on the Gold Coast (first edition Isert 1790, re-published in English 2007). Isert questioned the transatlantic slave trade, but not colonialism and social stratification on the basis of race per se. From him stems an important early contribution to the discussion about a Danish economy of colonial guilt. After having witnessed the transport of enslaved humans over the Atlantic, and the living conditions of enslaved laborers, he exclaims "Compensation is clearly impossible!" (Isert 2007, 251).
33. See the website of the Danish Film Institute: <http://www.dfi.dk/Nyheder/FILMupdate/2014/Juli/Guldkysten-gaar-i-optagelse.aspx> (accessed 26 January 2018).
34. The character's name Tim-Tam—still listed on the film's IMDb page—indicates that the relationship would have been modelled on, or least inspired by, that of Wulff Joseph Wulff (one of the historical models for the main character, see footnote 14) and Sara Malm, also known as Tim-Tam, of the coastal ethnic group Ga that had a tradition of intermarrying with Europeans (Ipsen 2014, 140–2). Wulff and Malm had three children, whose descendants, now in the 6th generation, still live in the Osu area of Accra next to Osu Castle/Fort Christiansborg, where Wulff and Sara Malm had their home and prosperous trading house, Frederiksminde or Frederichs Minde, that also still exists (Jørgensen 2014). It is important to note that Sara Malm was not a slave (see Wulff 1917; Wulff 2004; also see Obenson 2014). The existence of the Wulff family in Ghana is not reflected by the film.
35. See many comments on the film's official Facebook page, after the premiere and during the first weeks upon release, asking for subtitled copies: https://www.facebook.com/Guldkysten-Gold-Coast-1524326871120599/?h_c_ref=ARRmrz1lBYZGDo5IjEJ0pp6QZWnXTVSn-4IIM5iDAn2GZV-jFchNpJericWkuHlkgc&fref=nf (accessed 26 January 2018).
36. "Jeg sørgede ubevidst for at omgå mig med børn og dyr. Jeg vil gerne havde det så spontant og ægte som muligt. For når børn bliver bange, bliver de rigtigt bange. Det samme med dyr."
37. "Jeg instruerede ikke statisterne, for de skulle ikke være forberedte. De skulle ikke have en behagelig dag med slikbord og kaffe, men være nøgne og slaver. Det skulle være et helvede."

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Notes on contributor

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