

Article

Creaturely Life in “We Come as Friends”

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Abstract: In this article we focus on the analysis of a 2014 Austrian–French documentary *We come as friends* (110 min), written, directed, and produced by Hubert Sauper. *We come as friends* is a documentary about a corporate, polycentric, contemporary colonization of South Sudan. It is described by Sauper as “a modern odyssey, a dizzying, science fiction-like journey into the heart of Africa”. It is about Sudan, the continent’s biggest country, at the moment when it was divided into two nations in a 2011 referendum. It documents, according to Sauper, much more than the separation of the predominantly Christian south from the mostly “Muslim Arabs” of the rest of the Sudan; it shows how “an old ‘civilizing’ pathology reemerges—that of colonialism, clash of empires, and yet new episodes of bloody (and holy) wars over land and resources”. Inspired by Eric Santner’s concept of “creaturely life” we analyze a natural history of the present and creaturely expressions in *We come as friends*.

Keywords: creaturely life; film—*We come as friends*

Achille Mbembe argues that speaking about Africa today is almost impossible without prejudice and negative interpretation because “Africa is never seen as possessing things and attributes properly part of ‘human nature’” (Mbembe 2001, p. 1). From the beginning of colonization up to the present day, the notion of “absolute otherness” has been one of the main characteristics of Africa in Western philosophical, political, and other representations. This notion of “absolute otherness” is often framed in the discourse on animality—being like animals—and yet not animals, like beasts, “unambitious creatures” that need guardians (Mbembe 2001, p. 33). The contemporary representations of Africa, according to Mbembe, are still framed with this ideology of guarding, with the belief in humanism, reason, and progress. In this article, we focus on the analysis of one representation of Africa, more precisely of South Sudan in the 2014 Austrian–French documentary *We come as friends* (110 min), written, directed, and produced by Hubert Sauper¹. We argue that Sauper’s film is a project that captures the effects of the Western belief in humanity and progress in Africa, but most importantly it captures the creaturely dimension of life—life produced by a specific kind of power that originates in Western modernity, as elaborated by Eric Santner.

In his book *On Creaturely Life*, Santner argues that creaturely life is a mode of exposure of human beings to a traumatic dimension of political power. It embodies human vulnerability to political power, it distinguishes the human from the animal, but at the same time puts the human in a position of peculiar proximity at the very point of their radical difference. Following a series of German–Jewish writers (Kafka, Rosenzweig, Scholem, Benjamin, Celan) and their elaborations of human life under conditions of modernity, Santner sees creaturely life as a product of the biopolitical aspect of power²:

¹ Hubert Sauper is an Austrian documentary filmmaker based in France.

² The concept of biopower is introduced by Michel Foucault and later developed by many scholars, including Giorgio Agamben. Foucault sees the shift from juridical power to disciplinary power and later its combination with “regularization”

“it names the threshold where life becomes a matter of politics and politics comes to inform the very matter and materiality of life” (Santner 2006, p. 12). For Santner, German-Jewish thought departs from the logic of sovereignty articulated by Carl Schmitt, in which the constitution of a space of juridical normativity includes a reference to the state of exception (“the sovereign enjoys the power to suspend the law . . . in the name of protecting the security of the state”), by creating the boundary between “us” and “them”, a boundary which is based on the political decision, an external boundary that presupposes “a kind of *internal* boundary between law and its immanent ‘outside’” (pp. 13–14). Santner calls creaturely life the life that is called into being by exposure to this threshold of law and nonlaw, “the exposure to an ‘outlaw’ dimension of law internal to sovereign authority” (p. 29). In other words, for him, the paradoxes of the political theology of creaturely life are that “human beings are not just creatures among other creatures but are in some sense more creaturely than other creatures by virtue of an excess that is produced in the space of the political and that, paradoxically, counts for their ‘humanity’” (Santner 2006, p. 26). Moreover, one of the most important dimensions of creaturely life is that it is in a constant process of becoming, of undergoing creation, of historical mutation (Santner 2006, p. 39).³ This mutation can take many different forms, as Santner argues, but always includes “undeadness”, “the ruins of the past”, Benjamin’s notion of “natural history”, human history as a species of natural history (Santner 2006, p. 58).

According to Santner, Benjamin’s natural history refers to the fact that “human beings have not only natures but also second *natures*”: “natural history” is “born out of the dual possibilities that life can persist beyond the death of the symbolic forms that gave it meaning and that symbolic forms can persist beyond the death of the form of life that gave them human vitality. Natural history transpires against the background of this space between real and symbolic death, this space of the ‘undead’” (Santner 2006, p. 17).

Certainly, one of the fundamental questions raised by Sauper in his film *We come as friends* is about the impact of the historical violence of colonialism, and its persistence in the historical present. The film is described by Sauper as “a modern odyssey, a dizzying, science fiction-like journey into the heart of Africa” (Sauper 2014). It is about Sudan, the continent’s biggest country, at the moment when it was divided into two nations in a 2011 referendum. According to Sauper, it documents much more than the separation of the predominantly Christian south from the mostly “Muslim Arabs” of the rest of the Sudan; it shows how “an old ‘civilizing’ pathology reemerges—that of colonialism, clash of empires, and yet new episodes of bloody (and holy) wars over land and resources” (Sauper 2014).

Sauper can be seen as an author who documents colonization and its aftershocks in Africa.⁴ His work has caused different responses in both Europe and Africa. His film *Darwin’s nightmare* (Sauper 2014) is about globalization and the fishing export industry in Lake Victoria. It was nominated for an Oscar, but also caused parliamentary debates and protests in Tanzania. President Jakaya Kikwete claimed that “Hubert Sauper had hurt the country’s image and caused a slump in exports of Nile

as biopower. Biopower is “organized around the management of life” (Foucault 1998, p. 139). With biopower, “biological existence was reflected in political existence; the fact of living was no longer an inaccessible substrate that only emerged from time to time, aimed to randomness of death and its fatality, part of it passed into knowledge’s field of control and power’s sphere of intervention” (Foucault 1998, p. 142). Santner points out that Foucault’s important insight on the shift from juridical power to biopower has been powerfully developed by Agamben, according to whom “modern politics is characterized by the fact that the state of emergency . . . is itself becoming a rule of law” (Santner 2006, p. 86).

³ This becoming is related to the power that not only works by way of prohibition, but, as Zupancic argues, it is activated by surplus excitation; “surplus is no longer a hidden support of the law, rather it becomes one with the law” (Zupancic in Santner 2006, pp. 84–85).

⁴ It is now widely accepted, especially by postcolonial scholars, that contemporary neocolonialism is a residue of colonialism: “the process by which the European powers reached positions of economic, military, political, and cultural hegemony in much of Asia, Africa, and the Americas”. Contemporary colonialism (or neocolonialism) is not related to direct political control, but mostly to economic forms of control “whose linchpin is a close alliance between foreign capital and the indigenous elite”. The effects of these new forms of control have been “widespread poverty (even in countries that are rich in natural resources); burgeoning famine (even in countries that once fed themselves); the paralyzing ‘debt trap’; the opening up of resources for foreign interests; and, not infrequently, internal political oppression” (Shohat and Stam 2014, p. 17).

perch". He also claimed that Sauper's film lacks evidence of "linkages of the fish exports in Tanzania to the arms trade" (Molonoy et al. 2007, p. 605). Sauper was accused of manipulating information. He spent three years dealing with court cases and, while in France, he experienced accusations that he made fiction and sold it as a documentary. In addition, many of his informants in the movie experienced threats in Tanzania and were questioned by police.

While in *Darwin's nightmare* the narrative about globalization and the exploitation of Africa is very clear, in *We come as friends* Sauper presents a completely different approach, an approach which he calls "alien eyes", the point of view of the film as coming from the eyes of an alien, of Sauper's eyes and the eyes of Western viewers as foreign eyes. As Sauper points out in his interview with Eric Hynes, "The film is full of things but things are not explained" (Hynes 2015). For Sauper the word "documentary" is an ugly word: "a document that is obviously true or is the law, that has to inform people". It is an imperialistic tool because "it documents the Other for the purpose of the powerful" (Hynes 2015). The other ugly word for Sauper is "adventure": "going to the Other's territory is about adventure". It is a colonialist concept that is related to the first explorers and colonials and their perception of knowing: knowing how to bring development, knowing how to bring civilization. In *We come as friends*, he aims to subvert these concepts: aliens as colonizers do not know, the film director as an alien does not know, and viewers as aliens do not know. In his own words, he wants viewers to make connections of things by themselves, to translate what they see from his "adventurous travelogue", to push the boundaries (Hynes 2015). In our opinion, it is this engagement with the audience and Sauper's allegorical representation of "document" and "adventure" that moves his film *We come as friends* into the realm of creatureliness. By estranging familiar maps and concepts, by randomly picking people for filming without giving any explanation,⁵ the film is full of creaturely testimonies that function as the very "matter" of historical depositions, in a way which is explored by Santner in the context of natural history.

Directly at the beginning of the film we are introduced to the vivid visual and aerial controlled gaze that symbolizes the colonizer, angled aerial footage of the map of Africa. We are told that "African nations are invented by White men, who declared these countries to be free", and suddenly we are given a different view. The map transforms into something living; we are given an asymmetrical view of a bluish ocean dotted with flocks of birds. So, we can say that immediately, at the beginning of the movie, we are confronted with natural history in opposition to nature—the map as an embodiment of natural history, as a specific ruin of history, saturated with the memory of colonialism. Sauper offers to viewers an interesting point of view on the map—a point of view of an alien:

Imagine that you are lost in space in a tin cabin. You come closer to this planet, Africa. This is where humans originated ... Much later it was discovered, dispossessed, and colonized ... From now on you're a complete stranger. You're an alien ... (Voiceover from *We come as friends*)

By being allegorically put in the position of aliens, viewers are indexed as participants in the violent rhythms of human history. For Benjamin "allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things" (Santner 2006, p. 19). The allegorical mode of representation is the proper mode of representation of natural history, "the symbolic mode proper to the experience of irremediable exposure to the violence of history, the rise and fall of empires and orders of meaning, the endless cycle of struggles for hegemony; it is, furthermore, what defines the posture of melancholy, the affect so intimately linked to the dimension ... of 'the creaturely'" (Santner 2006, p. 20).

The film continues with allegorical representations of creaturely life, or to be more precise, with the materiality of creaturely life: We see in the honeyed light just before evening, a young naked boy with a beaded necklace dashing down a sunbaked path carrying a plastic bottle of water. His smile wide,

⁵ In his interview with Rapold, Sauper refers to himself as a "field poet" (Rapold 2015).

open, the bottle glistens in the sun and illuminates his face. The plastic of the bottle is a prelude to the intrusion of another creaturely material—tin, metal. Plastic and tin, two materials that can take us back into history—signifying colonization and industrialization, allegories of natural history on a global scale. Both, in different periods of time, have travelled the world and wherever they have been, they have transformed the landscapes and human life. Both were once celebrated as revolutionary discoveries and both have been caught up in different political orientations and transformations in the political economy of capitalism (representing colonial economies and then a growing dominance of transnational capital, mass cultural consumption across transnational boundaries, the formation of a “new” international division of labor and environmental threats). But both are also connected to melancholy. They refer to “the original life worlds” that existed before. Like the beaded necklace worn by the boy, they are invested with an excess of signification.

After this brief allegorical introduction of materials, Sauper introduces himself as an alien. We see a toy-like, lightweight, three-man prop plane (made by Sauper) in which the filmmaker and his two cameramen zip about South Sudan. We see a group of people that surround the plane. We see Sauper talking to the leaders of a village—it will be dark soon, and he and his crew need a place to stay. The leaders are skeptical, even hostile—when has the arrival of a white man been good for them? A local chief asks Sauper, via an interpreter, why he wants to spend the night with them. “We can’t see so we cannot fly at night”, Sauper explains, and the interpreter points at a piece of paper that guarantees that the white stranger and his companions have “come as friends”. And so, they do, like many others before them. Here we are presented with yet another allegory of natural history. As the title of Sauper’s documentary suggests, in the contemporary Sudan everybody comes as a friend. Friends come from everywhere: In the film we see the human rights activists, the UN peace keeping forces, the Texan missionaries, US investors, and China’s businesspeople and workers. There is the remarkable history of “friends” coming to Sudan and this is where the Schmittian background can be felt: They are related to the state of emergency that itself has become a rule of law, that is, they are connected to violence.⁶

If colonization is about naming, marking, mapping territory, then Sauper’s documentary flows in quite a different direction: He does not specify places, he does not give us the names of people being interviewed—all statements about their desperate situation hang in a specific limbo of “black continent”. Whereas he is elusively mobile, hovering over barren landscapes and visiting a cross-section of people, they—the people of Sudan—are somehow stuck, earth-bound, exposed to the greater global historical forces and powerful interests. The sense of science fiction is constantly present, as Sauper represents himself as a man visiting from a “spaceship” (the name of his plane is “Sputnik”), and that sense recurs in the film each time with the flight scenes (his departures and landings) that punctuate interviews with people. The film is a mosaic of interviews. We see villagers describing the many assaults against them and their livelihoods, first from militias and then from industry people (mostly oil and gas companies). We see the prefab offices of a Chinese oil company, where engineers talk blithely of how similar their experience in Africa is to that of science fiction astronauts seeking out resources to extract from far-off worlds. We see Sauper asking a trio of Chinese engineers, “Which planet did you come from?” We see Chinese oil workers watching *Star Trek* and the German science fiction series *Raumpatrouille Orion* and drinking Coca-Cola during their leisure time, while at the same time local people are wandering around a Chinese oil company and trying to find a livable spot (everything is polluted, there is not even drinkable water, plastic bottles are everywhere). We see South Sudanese children in tears as missionaries from Texas forcibly put shoes and socks on their feet. The stated goal of these evangelical Christians is to establish the “New Texas”

⁶ In contemporary times, as Reinhard argues, “the mysterious disappearance of the enemy, . . . may even result in something like global psychosis . . . , the disappearance of the enemy implies the loss of measure and ground, threatening to unleash monstrous forms and violence, which would ultimately be impossible to control because they would not be identifiable”, given the fact that the dualism of friend/enemy has been disintegrated” (Reinhard 2006, p. 17).

according to their view of the Bible, explaining the Genesis line about Adam and Eve being “naked but not ashamed”. Their mission is to transform naked African people into uniformed Christians, which is a difficult task, because, as one missionary says, there are many, many more naked people in nearby woods. We see a young American couple building a large house in the middle of a South Sudanese village, setting up fences and teaching the locals about one of the most important values of the West—private property. We see the administrator of a US aid program giving a speech to a confused group of villagers, while he announces plans to make electricity available to everyone. We see a “shaman” dressed in a leopard skin, not paying attention to the camera. We see an Investors Conference on TV in which we hear that Sudan is the 17th-fastest-growing economy in the world, rapidly developing due to the oil industry and foreign investments, we see Hillary Clinton (then Secretary of State) addressing conference attendees and telling them that South Sudan will profit from American investments made in the country. She says “we do not want a new form of colonialism in Africa”, and a number of potential investors are talking about a “win-win” situation for everyone. We see a Sudanese woman singing “My Land” and a tribal leader who, with watery eyes, shows Sauper a piece of paper—a copy of a contract with a Texas firm: Hundreds of thousands of acres of land given on a long-term lease. We see a young, white American man who makes a living by blowing up mines and bombs left over from the region’s many recent wars. When holding an African baby in his lap, he wonders why they (the natives) are two hundred years “behind us” in terms of civilization.

This mosaic of statements, feelings, comments and questionings suggests that there is no classic sovereign power that can hold everything together, a gravitational pull that can maintain a community. The entire territory is represented as an abstraction. There is no vibrancy in the form of life into which one is inscribed, and from which one derives one’s most basic sense of orientation in the world. In fact, there is no world—there are many worlds in this heterotopia-like colonization, many different zones occupied by corporations and dispossessed human beings. This heterotopic violence, the violence that creates many different worlds, encapsulates what Mbembe (2001) calls the post colony.⁷ In summation, it means there is no primal dimension of the social that implies the political form of being together. The people no longer belong to a community as it used to be (the traditional tribal way of life, heritage, kinship, etc.) but nor do they belong to the new state, the free market, and globalization. They are on threshold of the “state of emergency” that itself has become a rule of law.

In Sauper’s film, all colonized bodies are represented as witnesses to their violent and enigmatic uprooting and displacement from their habitat. They are all on thresholds: the past, the communal, the common are being devastated and uprooted; the future is unknown, they are becoming creatures. According to Santner, “creature is not so much the name of a determinate state of being as it is the signifier of an ongoing *exposure*, of being caught up in the process of ‘becoming creature’ through the dictates of divine alterity” (Lupton quoted in Santner 2006, p. 28). In this process of “becoming”, as Santner claims, the peculiar proximity of the human to the animal at the very point of their radical difference is a product of a traumatic dimension of political power and social bonds, whose structures have undergone radical transformations (Santner 2006, p. 12).

Additionally, it is not just the body of the Sudanese that suffer, but also the earth itself. The Chinese company that drills for oil—the Chinese oil facility that employs a total of four locals (three cleaners and a security guard)—is poisoning the local water supply and has displaced people who have lived and buried their people on ancestral lands for centuries. As a Chinese employee says, while driving to work through a miles-long garbage heap, “Environmental protection is their responsibility.” The poisoned water, the polluted ancestral land and burial sites, mounds of unknown garbage that suffocate the earth suggest that nature is no longer the same, that it is suffused with human-produced waste, that it is what Benjamin calls natural history. According to Benjamin, we encounter the radical otherness

⁷ For Mbembe, it is the violence of economy that entails, among many other things, the fragmentation of public authority; it creates the condition for privatization of both natural resources and political sovereignty, and permanent, never-ending civil war (Mbembe 2001).

of nature only when it appears at its vanishing point, as camouflaged historical remnant, when it becomes an enigmatic ruin (beyond our capacity to endow it with meaning). Santner, as we have already said, situates creaturely life in the midst of “natural history”, or more precisely in fissures or caesuras in the space of the meaning of natural history (Santner 2006, p. xv). Such is the life of people expelled from their land and forced to live in slums, in the Zone (the cemetery) haunted by spirits. Creaturely life whereby natural history traverses the body of a chicken and the body of a baby through contaminated water; united in dying or surviving (chicken and baby thus, insanely, made the same).

What is so striking about Sauper’s representation of the Sudanese in the film is the “excitation” in the way Santner writes about it—the traces of colonial life, the traumatic epiphany of the different registers of human suffering. In other words, Sauper’s film is not just about violence and neocolonialism; rather, it is about “indexes of creaturely life in the violent rhythms of human history”. The film is not simply about dissolution and loss, “it is equally one of perpetual intensification and agitation—of ex-citation” (Santner 2006, p. 115).⁸ But what is much more important is that it is about the process of “becoming creature”.

The question is, can we, as viewers, be responsive to this dimension of natural history and becoming creature captured on camera? What is at issue here is not just to see the world from the point of view of those who suffer, of the Other, in other words, empathy in the usual sense. Santner argues that in order to respond to the feeling of hopelessness when we are confronted with projects “aimed at grasping creaturely dimension”, it is essential to be open to the alterity, to the uncanny strangeness of the Other, “through such interventions that one remains faithful to the commandment of neighbor-love” (“the biblical injunction, first articulated in Leviticus 19:18, and then elaborated in the Christian teaching, to love one’s neighbor as oneself”).⁹ For Santner, a neighbor is a deeply paradoxical figure, an alien traumatic kernel, or to put it in his own words: “The being whose proximity we are enjoined to inhabit and open to according to the imperative of neighbor love is always a subject at odds with itself, split by thoughts, desires, fantasies, and pleasures it can never fully claim as its own and that in some sense both do and do not belong to it” (Santner 2006, p. xii). In psychoanalytic terms, this is related to the concept of *jouissance*.¹⁰ Santner, together with Reinhard and Žizek, is interested in this

⁸ This is how Santner analyses W.G. Sebald’s work. In his book, Santner is mostly interested in the “natural history of the present” in the work of German writer Sebald, particularly in his 2001 novel *Austerlitz*, in which the main character tries to unravel the mystery of his own existence (raised in a foster home in North Wales during WWII, knowing little about his origins—born in Czechoslovakia but never to see his father again following the German invasion, or his mother who died in a concentration camp). In his life-story, the character Austerlitz refers to his wanderings in search of his lost father. He is focused on buildings (train stations, fortresses . . .) and different objects that for Santner function as the very emblems of natural history, as objects (or substances like dust and ash) that have the status of creaturely. The materiality of the object world for Sebald, according to Santner, “does not merely signify the ‘natural’ corruptibility of all things earthly; rather, this corruptibility is an index of their participation in the violent rhythms of human history”. For Santner, natural history has a manic dimension, testifying to “undeadness” (or in Benjamin’s words, petrified unrest) (Santner 2006, pp. 114–18).

⁹ See (Žizek et al. 2006).

¹⁰ In Lacanian psychoanalysis, *jouissance* refer to the inaccessible core of the inner self, something monstrous that is not only within us but outside. In Lacan’s concept of the emergence of the subject, there are three orders: imaginary, symbolic and real. In order to become a subject, “I” must go through the mirror stage. The mirror stage depicts the period when a child is captivated by its own image in the mirror, before developing the faculty of language, and recognizes itself as a unity, as a single, unified, and exterior “I”. For Lacan, this identification is imaginary, it is always built on an illusion. The subject misidentifies the spectral “Other”, which gazes from the mirror as the object of desire. This narcissistic misrecognition involves a denial of the fragmentation of the child’s body and conceals the lack that inflects the subject’s own coming into being, the lack which the subject will try to overcome by entering the symbolic. The symbolic can be viewed as realism, a realist narrative that “mirrors the reality”. It includes language, law, social rituals, science, customs... in short, it is the world of words, of representations. In the symbolic, the subject becomes a subject in language and accepts the laws of language. With an entering into the symbolic, the subject sacrifices something—it sacrifices an immediate access to the real (primordial Thing), he/she becomes alienated and this “alienation constitutes the subject as such”. This lack of the subject is productive since the subject continuously tries to fill it, to close it with different identifications, but there is no identification in the symbolic, in the social that can restore the real. The real is lost forever, sacrificed or castrated when the subject enters the symbolic. Nevertheless, it is exactly this loss of fullness that forces the subject to try to find it in the symbolic. For Lacan, this lack of the real is the lack of a presymbolic, real enjoyment, a lack of *jouissance*. The sacrifice of *jouissance* causes desire for it and in that context the primordial Thing becomes posited as an external object, the “first outside”, which remains desirable but still impossible (see Urbancic 2011, pp. 5–7).

impossible imperative that “despite its seemingly universal dissemination, despite its appropriation in the name of various moral and political agendas . . . remains opaque and does not give itself up willingly to univocal interpretation” (Zizek et al. 2006, p. 5). After the slaughters of colonialism, World War II, and the many religious or ethnic wars, the question of humanity and the notion of neighbor (the Other) is even more complex. Emphasizing the difference between the global and the universal, Santner argues that openness to the Other is “the very locus of a universality”. If we think about the difference of the Other in terms of global consciousness, that is, that “conflicts are generated through external differences between cultures and societies”, then we miss the possibility for openness to the Other, the universality that “signifies the possibility of a shared opening to the agitation and turbulence *immanent* in any construction of identity” (Santner 2001, p. 5). In other words, universality means that “every stranger is ultimately just like me, ultimately familiar; his or her strangeness is a function of a different vocabulary, a different set of names that can always be translated” (Santner 2001, pp. 5–6). The possibility of a “we”, of communality, is granted on the basis of the fact that anything familiar is ultimately strange, and that, indeed, in a crucial sense we are strangers to ourselves. In light of this, the neighbor signifies “not some final overcoming” or “full integration of this agitation, but rather the work of traversing our fantasmatic organizations of it” (Santner 2001, p. 5), breaking down our defenses against it. In other words, we have to be open to “the possibility of an encounter and engagement with the creaturely dimension of our neighbor” (Santner 2006, p. 141).

In our opinion, Sauper’s film *We come as friends* does open the room for this possibility.

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