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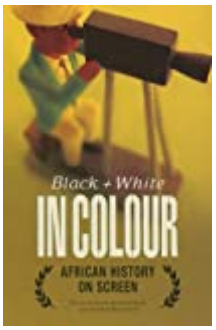

Vivian Bickford-Smith, Richard Mendelsohn, eds. *Black and White in Colour: African History on Screen.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007. 374 pp. $26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8214-1747-8.

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Historians at the Movies

In the 1980s, a debate arose among American historians regarding the legitimacy of film as representation of the past and as a means to interpret it. If newsreel films and documentaries could be accepted as complementary to the written record, what about fiction films? Conceding that the historian's search for truth about "facts" would need to accommodate the filmmaker's penchant for artifact, Robert A. Rosenstone proposed a distinction between "true invention" and "false invention" for measuring the merits of historical films. For historical films to be "true," according to Rosenstone, they must take into account the existing historical sources. Whereas they may do so creatively, they ought to avoid what he calls "capricious invention" (p. 2). Fiction films must be accountable to readily available knowledge of the past–so as not to falsify that past. Armed with Rosenstone's theoretical yardstick, such as it is, contributors to this volume examine feature films dating from the 1960s to the present.

As its title makes clear, *Black and White in Colour: African History on Screen*, the focus of the book is on African history and its cinematic representation. The study of African history emerged under European colonialism, while the origins of cinema (1895) coincided roughly with the apogee of imperialism, just one decade after the conclusion of the Berlin Conference. Whether through history or cinema, representing the past of a continent whose archives and images have been produced against a background of conquest and empire involves countering many myths and appropriations of Africans. In other words, to be a historian or a filmmaker of Africa today, let alone a historian attempting to make use of historical films, requires having one's eyes on the "true invention(s) and false invention(s)" accumulated through decades of mischief at the library and the studio–as well as on location.

The seventeen chapters that make up the book were delivered as papers at the First International African Film and History Conference held at the University of Cape Town in July 2002, convened by Vivian Bickford-Smith and Richard Mendelsohn. Contributors were asked to consider how fiction films have represented (or misrepresented) the African past, and the authors mostly adhere to the Rosenstone yardstick mentioned above. The top-

ics range from reconstructions of precolonial West Africa to post-apartheid South Africa, from Islam's complicity in slavery to imperialism, from homosexual relations in eighteenth-century Dutch colonies to genocide in independent Rwanda. Most chapters concern films from South and West Africa, but all major regions are present. The editors and contributors strive to demonstrate that the features under study lend themselves to discussions of the contemporary ideologies of the place or period represented and can enhance our understanding of attitudes about Africa and its inhabitants. Ultimately, the extent to which historical films "use the past to raise questions about the present" proves their value to these scholars (p. 10).

" 'What Are We?' *Proteus* and the Problematics of History" is the chapter that most imaginatively addresses these questions. Nigel Worden comes close to the conclusion that history may be in danger of being overtaken by film as the format best suited to explore the past dynamically. This is the only piece to fully engage with film as an art form, as more than a means of imparting history lessons, and it allows the filmmakers freedom to play with time and place in a manner that energizes the thorny debate about the possibility of ever knowing the past (casting doubts about the reliability of the written record). Ostensibly set in 1725, *Proteus* (2003) recounts the ten-year liaison between two inmates, one Khoi and the other Dutch, on the infamous penal colony Robben Island. Tried for sodomy in the Cape Colony at a time when homosexual relations were being persecuted in the Netherlands, both men are executed by drowning. While taking place against the background of dispossession of the indigenous population of South Africa, the sexual politics in the metropole are never far away. The film juxtaposes realistic depiction and claims authenticity with narrative and visual disruptions introducing anachronisms in a daring attempt to draw parallels between Robben Island in the eighteenth century and apartheid in the 1960s. Made by activist filmmakers John Greyson and Jack Lewis, *Proteus* employs, as Worden points out, a technique used by contemporary historians, the micro-narrative (examining an episode in detail to shed light on the social processes prevalent at a specific time and place), to challenge "the notion of a single reality" (p. 96). By focusing on a documented court case from colonial times while adumbrating the repression under National Party-ruled South Africa, *Proteus* suggests that present and past are not easily separable. And, it is innovative approaches which call for alternative possibilities that allow historians not only to make use of fiction films but also to take cues from them.

Somewhere near the other end of the spectrum is the chapter "Beholding the Colonial Past in Claire Denis's *Chocolat*." A reading that relies heavily on other critics' interpretations leads Ruth Watson to dismiss *Chocolat* (1988) as a historical film on account of what she perceives as the director's "artistic plundering" (p. 202). The ambiguity that characterizes Denis's cinema does not go unnoticed by Watson, yet she, too, tenaciously upholds the tension "between the colonial past as aesthetic image and the colonial past as history," decreeing that the two cannot coexist (p. 188). For Watson, the beauty of Denis's images disqualifies her nuanced depiction of gender and race relations in colonial Cameroon through the eyes of a child. If it is indeed true that "memories of the colonial past as nostalgia or homesickness" reek of yearning for a lost empire, the version of the colonial past explored in *Chocolat* (especially taking into consideration the connections that the film suggests with the country after independence) goes well beyond the "timeless Africa" portrait Watson takes it to be (p. 188). Quite specifically, the film remits us to three periods in the history of Cameroon: the late 1980s (when France, the lead character, revisited the country of her youth), the 1950s (her childhood under French administration), and the early part of the twentieth century around 1916 (right after Cameroon ceased to be a German colony). The links that the film makes between Cameroon's German and French colonial past should "qualify" *Chocolat* as a subject worthy of study for historians of Africa–especially when films like *Zulu* (1964), *Out of Africa* (1985), *Hotel Rwanda* (2004), or *Khartoum* (1966) are said to fit the bill. Rather than luring viewers into imperialist nostalgia, *Chocolat* teasingly invites us to a subtle examination of what it means to be a foreigner, forever wavering between boundaries as elusive as the horizon; that that should be the fate of colonial children and at the core of settler societies escapes Watson's analysis.

Absent from *Black and White in Colour* are documentary films, making one wonder why the editors chose not to tap into a genre that could add significantly to the discussion. Perhaps, they feared that documentarians might be too close to historians in their claims to authenticity to merit inclusion. Whatever the reason, the historians here follow too narrow a path in their approach to film. Filmmakers reserve the right to craft an internally coherent work–irrespective of the exigencies of historians. Rather than availing themselves of a wide array of theoretical perspectives, contributors accept Rosenstone's critical categories unquestioningly. Lastly, most pieces

in this book reflect a rigid approach to structure: a synopsis of the films, an introduction, the history, and conclusion.

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