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Africa and the Centenary of Cinema

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At the centenary of cinema in 1995, and after nearly thirty-five years of sub-Saharan and diasporic praxis, African filmmakers and film critics gathered at a conference in London to discuss the role of cinema in the forging of new symbolic representations of Africa. The centerpiece of the Screen Griots program, organized by the British Film Institute's African Caribbean Unit, was the "Africa and the History of Cinematic Ideas" conference focusing on the cinema of the African continent. One of the results of this conference was the edited book *Symbolic Narratives/African Film: Audiences, Theory and the Moving Image*, which brings together exponents of diverse fields, including films studies, cultural studies, filmmaking, journalism, comparative literature and beyond.

In a succinct preface, June Givanni (head of the BFI's African and Caribbean Film Unit and the book's editor) touches on the perennial feud between the creators of the moving image and the critics who write about film. Without pitting one camp against another, *Symbolic Narratives/African Film* exposes the complex symbiotic relationship that often develops between them. By separating the speakers into panels of artists and panels of scholars, Givanni and the conference organizers may have avoided direct confrontations, but the tension between the two groups is not absent from the print version.[1] The commentary from respondents (mostly filmmakers) to the various papers is indicative of the acrimony of the exchange. Idrissa Ouedraogo vigorously protests what he considers the critics' penchant for categorizing African films under labels such as political, moralist, traditional, historical. Instead, he argues, critics should focus on the difficulties involved on production in the continent rather than on the categories; on the fact that African filmmakers work under extraordinarily pressing circumstances. As he puts it, "If you don't like the films, don't talk about them; if you can't defend them, don't mention them" (p. 122). This unfortunate call for critics to practice self-censorship finds an echo in commentaries made by a number of other filmmakers, yet perhaps the most salutary attitude comes from Cameroonian filmmaker and director Bassek Ba Kobhio, who, despite taking the critics to task, calls for conciliation between art practitioners and theorists. He argues that critics cannot act as the "thought lobby" (p. 148),

and calls for a critical role for African audiences at FESPACO through the reintroduction of the Prix de Public (The Public Prize). Along with Nourid Fouzid, Bassek Ba Kobhio urges critics to be cognizant of the local conditions of production and proposes that a critical praxis reflecting indigenous instruments of analysis be developed. In this, he is not far from Haile Gerima or Gaston Kabore. All three agree that African filmmakers have a social role to "go deep into their collective mind to try to retie the broken thread of our history and our memory" (p. 187).

While accepting that critics have a place in African cinema, the filmmakers further insist that critics also have a duty to be constructive. An open dialogue between critic and filmmaker must be established, but that conversation cannot exclude the African audience–and this is something many contributors to the book emphasize. African cinema organically grows out of African reality; as such, its primary viewers need to be those who experience it. While this does not translate into the negation of an international market, it firmly grounds cinematic practice in Africa to an African viewing public. Since most African countries lack legislation and rules of practice for their film industry, filmmakers find themselves in a tight spot to finance their work, let alone distribute their films. To transform that reality, conscientious filmmakers and critics need to find a way to cooperate, for both parties have a stake in a historically responsible representation of Africa. The volume begins with this notion of historical responsibility, in the form of a sobering essay entitled "Africa, the West and the Analogy of Culture: The Cinematic Text after Man" by Jamaican critic Sylvia Wynter, to which I shall return.

Consisting of three parts followed by two useful appendixes (including a list of film screenings), the book is organized around panels broadly covering "Contexts," "Arguments" and "Reflections." Each of the nine panels is divided into an introduction, a presentation, and a respondent section. Part I offers an overview of the development of debates and issues surrounding African cinema generally. Part II–the bulk of the volume–takes up the themes of iconography, mental decolonization, and creative practice; genres and ideologies; postmodernism, information technology, indigenization, and popular art forms; and audiences and critical reception. Part III, the shortest, wraps up the book with personal insights by Tunisian filmmaker Tahar Cheriaa and Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiongo.

At the end of the book, Ngugi wa Thiong'o quotes Sylvia Wynter's paper: "If no other medium was to be more effective than the cinema in ensuring the continued submission to its single memory of the peoples whom the West has subordinated in the course of its rise to world hegemony, no other medium is so equipped to effect our common human emancipation from this memory, from the prison walls of its world perception" (p. 241). This provides the framework against which the discussion of African cinematic ideas and symbolic narratives takes place. Thus, from the outset, the re-conceptualization of Africa's place in the cultural sphere is advanced as the task of African cinema. Imruh Bakari, who wrote the Introduction, further suggests that what Wynter is calling for is "an African renaissance for the twenty-first century" (p. 10). What would such a renaissance entail and how are filmmakers to meet this challenge? Since its inception in the early 1960s, sub-Saharan African cinema has been representing African life and society against the grainy image produced by empire, colonial and ethnographic films popularized by Europeans and Americans; that is, African filmmakers have been countering the appropriation of African images the world over. Indeed, African cinema can be said to have emerged as a tool of struggle for recovery and is thus "a child of African independence" (p. 3). But that moment of understanding cinema solely as a tool of liberation (as "third cinema" dictates) has passed. How do filmmakers engage with the task of erasing the image of Africa (and Africans) as Europe's "Other" in the post-colonial phase, in a post-Soviet world, and in the post-modern state? What images are being created to substitute this and usher in a new memory? How is African cinema living up to its historical responsibility?

According to Ella Shohat, contemporary African cinema calls attention to "the fault lines of gender, class, ethnicity, region, partition, migration, diaspora, religion and spirituality" (p. 123). Thus, while working in a world that shuns nationalism, the idea of nation is not entirely rejected by African cinema (perhaps Manthi Diawara would beg to differ here). At the same time, African filmmakers confront the repressions imposed by national cinemas and question their limitations–as the work of David Achkar, Raoul Peck and John Akomfrah attest. Rather than genre specific films, which some critics continue to expect, the creative artists respond with polygeneric films; rather than remaining within the tradition-versus-modernity paradigm, filmmakers are embracing a "bottom up" approach to history which they often convey through popular memory, thus "legitimising oral history by 'inscribing' it on screen" (p. 126). In this way, African filmmakers are responding to the challenges of

the twenty-first century by revealing in their films a space where the imaginary offers diverse identities and cultures that, not unlike those beyond the continent, have become hybridized. The oeuvre of Djibril Diop Mambety comes to mind, to offer one example.

The answers African filmmakers are providing to the question "how does one create a new symbolic order through film narrative?" are as varied as the individuals making films–and this is a view expressed in the book when Imruh Bakari equates African cinema with a cinema of *auteurs* (at times loosely periodized into three generations or "waves": the first starting with Ousmane Sembene and Med Hondo, the second including filmmakers in the 1980s and 1990s like Idrissa Ouedraogo and Gaston Kabore, and the third still emerging).

In this cinema of *auteurs*, women cannot be absent. In his short but powerfully allegorical piece entitled "The Intolerable Gift," Teshome Gabriel reminds us about the pivotal, but often neglected, role of women in African cinema. He begins by establishing the connections between storytelling and images–making visible through performance art what is invisible–arguing that Africa cinema is at once a shared experience and an "intolerable gift." If there is an expectation of return, a gift makes demands; if grounded in an economy of exchange, the gift inherently becomes impossible (because of an anticipated reciprocity on the part of the giver). Yet Gabriel yearns for an alternative idea of the gift–where gift would be infinite, surpassing the expectation of reciprocity, unidirectional and beyond return (to be forwarded to future generations). To illustrate that idea, Gabriel recounts an autobiographical journey where he speaks of two gifts he received from his mother upon departure from Ethiopia thirty-two years earlier: a clay cup and a photograph of Haile Selassie near a young Gabriel sitting at a typewriter. It was that maternal gesture that enabled him to understand the potential of cinema in his life. Without his knowing, Gabriel's story of displacement (represented both by the clay cup he drank from as a child and the photograph that reveals the irony of his exile) was being scripted by his mother. Through the selfless nature of her gift, Gabriel eventually was able to "shoot memory" (p. 98), in a sense, instead of film and learned that "cinema should not simply be images printed in celluloid but what those images refer to–the memories, the lived experiences, the dreams, the unseen realm of myths and spirits that hover beyond and between the images" (p. 99). Memory (or cinematic text), to return to Sylvia Wynter, emancipated from the "prison walls" of European iconography. For as filmmaker Mariama Hima expresses it, "the gift of cinema has given us the possibility of putting ourselves in the picture, seeing ourselves in these images" (p. 104).

While critics are quick to acknowledge that African cinema has shifted away from the political modernism of the first generation–when continental films were marked by liberationist and didactic tendencies–to pay closer attention to "the aesthetics and politics of ambivalence" (pp. 145-146), African filmmakers remain constant in their commitment to social responsibility, consciousness, and awareness in African film. Clyde Taylor, in fact, argues that "the genius of African cinema" is precisely that "its founding examples have come from the most conscientious artists" (p. 140); Gaston Kabore stresses the role African filmmakers play as "consciousness awakeners" (p. 188); and Tafataona Mahoso, echoing Sylvia Wynter, reaffirms the idea of cinema as the medium through which Africans can effect the reclamation and reconstruction of the continent. In short, at the end of the twentieth-century African filmmakers remained in solidarity with the foundations that helped establish the pan-African Filmmakers Federation (FEPACI).

When pressed to define just what constitutes African cinema, towards the end of the book Samir Farid suggests: "African cinema is the films made by African filmmakers, whether they are living in Africa or in the United States, or here or there; whether it's cinema spoken in French or English. African cinema is the films which have been made by African filmmakers, regardless of how they express it" (pp. 191-192). And while not every contributor to the volume might agree with this definition, by compiling a collection as diverse as *Symbolic Narratives/African Film*, it seems that June Givanni (and by extension the conference organizers at the BFI) would concur. Farid further points out an important distinction at times overlooked by pan-Africanist zeal: African cinema is sub-Saharan cinema (or "black Africa" cinema), as Maghrebian cinema (or Arab culture cinema) is markedly different. While keeping the conversation open among filmmakers regardless of origin, as the volume does by including all African artistic communities, the two represent distinct continental cinematic practices. Black African cinema, as a number of conference participants suggest, has much more in common with films from the African diaspora; North African cinema shares an umbilical cord with Middle Eastern film practices–which, at any rate, precede autochthonous sub-Saharan filmmaking. Perhaps, in an age of transnationalism and globalization, to even mention these regional differences might be considered pedestrian. Yet, when the task of

re-conceptualizing symbolic narratives is at stake, it is paramount to keep an eye on the sources that nourish the imaginary realm.

Note

[1]. In addition to appearing in book form, the conference proceedings were also recorded (audio and video) and the transcripts are available at the BFI in London.