

African Cinema in the Nineties

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For African cinema, the final decade of this century has been a mixed bag of promises, hopes, achievements, and continued struggle and frustration with the same set of issues and challenges that have always confronted filmmakers throughout the continent. Hopes and projections of political and economic renewal and transformation under the aegis of World Bank-mandated adjustment programs, and other liberalization measures, and the positive fall-out that these were expected to have, especially on the cultural sector, actually turned out to be disastrous. African filmmakers began to experience the painful effects of budget cuts and the gradual loss of both external and internal funding for production. At the same time, the slow but orchestrated disappearance of movie houses, one of the sad occurrences of the 90's, began as privatization made purchase possible by local entrepreneurs who, in time, converted these into warehouses for sugar, rice, cement, and other commodities. These conditions contributed to intensifying the perennial crisis of production, distribution, and exhibition of African cinema on African soil, so that barely three years to the end of the century the lingering shadows of this crisis continue to hover and obscure the few notable achievements of the last decade.

Responses to this crisis on the part of African filmmakers ranged from the usual accusations of ignorance and neglect of culture industries by African states and entrepreneurs, to indictment of the marginalization of African cinema by countries of the North, and to the deployment of various individual as well as collective efforts to reverse this crisis in more durable fashion. Notable in the latter category are the recent efforts to refashion the Panafrican Federation of Filmmakers (FEPACI) into a more active body and voice for African cinema, the establishment of *Union des Créateurs et Entrepreneurs Culturels de l'Afrique de l'Ouest* (UCECAO), on the initiative of veteran Malian filmmaker Souleyemane Cissé and others. Developments in Southern Africa, particularly with the dismantling of formal apartheid in South Africa and the end of the RENAMO insurgency in Mozambique, have opened up new opportunities for production, distribution, exhibition, partnerships including other forms of networking and capacity building. New production houses and other film-related ventures have sprung up in Zimbabwe (The African Script Development Fund, The Film Training School in Harare, Framework International, Media for Development Trust, Zimmedia, Africa Film and TV) and in Mozambique (Ebano Multimedia, under the direction of veteran filmmaker Pedro Pimenta). Some of these have been instrumental in enabling productions by new and young filmmakers such as the first feature by Zimbabwean writer-turned-filmmaker Tsitsi Dangarembga's, *Everyone's Child* (1997), Isaac Mabhikwa's *More Time* (1993), and many others. They have also

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<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v2/v2i1a4.pdf>

enabled filmmakers from other parts of Africa to film in Southern Africa. The Southern African Film Festival (SAFF), under the direction of Zimbabwean filmmaker Isaac Mabhikwa, is fast emerging as a prominent venue for filmmakers from the region and elsewhere on the continent, as well as for filmmakers from the African Diaspora. SAFF, by holding its fourth festival in October 1998 in Harare, along with the Cape Town Southern African Film and TV Market, now joins Carthage and FESPACO as one of the major film festivals on the continent.

South Africa holds a great deal of promise for African cinema. This past year has witnessed what, perhaps, is a sign of things to come. The first major feature film directed by a black South African was released this year. Titled *Fools* (1998), the film is directed by Ramadan Suleman, who was associated with Souleyemane Cissé. Produced by the South African production house, Natives At Large, Ebano Multi-Media from Mozambique, and others, the film is an adaptation of a short story by South African writer Njabulo Ndebele.

Furthermore, South Africa film industry's leader, Interleisure (recently acquired by Primedia, owner of the Ster-Kinekor theater chain in the sub-region) has recently entered into partnership with the Black South African investment group, Thebe Investment Trust. This alliance will create the Ster-Moribo chain to operate cinema theaters primarily in the black townships. Will African films eventually wind their way into this giant empire whose mainstay at the moment is primarily Hollywood films? Will this be the start of more investment in African film production? This is the challenge for African cinema in the "New" South Africa.

Co-productions and other forms of production partnerships between African filmmakers and film companies from different parts of the continent have registered some encouraging developments in the 90's. One witnesses an increasing turn toward South Africa. There is a gradual trend for filmmakers to cross various kinds of borders to shoot their films in locations and languages outside of their countries of origin and, at the same time, use technicians, actors, actresses, and other resources and facilities available in these countries. This has been the case with Souleyemane Cissé, who ventured from Mali into Zimbabwe to film his epic *Waati*, a story set in Southern and West Africa with a multi-lingual set of characters. Similarly, Cameroonian Jean-Pierre Bekolo's film, *Aristotle's Plot* (1995), benefited from co-production arrangements with the Zimbabwe-based Framework International, and the film, which is in English, also features South African actors. More recently, Idrissa Ouedraogo of Burkina Faso, shot his latest feature, *Kini And Adams* (1997), on location in Domboshawa, Zimbabwe, again with the collaboration of Framework International, and a Zimbabwean and South African crew and cast. The fact that this film was done entirely in English hints of a more pronounced and interesting shift toward a polyglot African film practice, evidence of the readiness or resolve of filmmakers to make full use of the available languages of the continent over and beyond their own, no matter what their level of competence or performance.

In opting for a narrative marked by a pronounced geo-cultural indeterminacy and using English instead of More or French, the language of his previous films, is Ouedraogo positing new and different imperatives for African cinema enabling it to break out of its present crisis of perennial struggle and marginalization in the industry? Is it a turn toward or a desire for greater "diversality" (some would say universality) make African films more appealing and marketable to broader audiences? If, so what are the costs and benefit of this presumed "diversality"?

For Merzak Allouache of Algeria, director of *Omar Gatlato* (1976), *Bab El-Owed City* (1994), and *Salut Cousin* (1996), the issue is one of integrity. He asks his fellow African filmmakers: "...are we losing a sense of our own reality, are we compromising cinematic content for 'northern' funding?" This sentiment has been echoed by many other filmmakers who voice concern about the sometimes blatant tendency of funders to dictate the content and form of African films. Cheik Oumar Cissoko, the Malian filmmaker whose film *Gumba* (1995) won the Grand Prize at FESPACO in 1995, and who is currently finishing his latest film, *La Genese* (*Genesis*), suggests: "Universal themes are the compulsory path that our cinema has to take to make a name for itself."

These issues and many others about the narrative content, form, style, technique and execution will continue to fuel much of the debate and commentary on the future of African cinema and, surely, more informed analyses will emerge in the years to come. In the meantime, a cursory glance at some of the recent productions in African cinema reveals a trend toward greater diversity and plurality of stories, styles, techniques, themes, and ideologies. Some filmmakers are attracted or pushed toward stories presumed to be universal either in content, reference, inference, or implication, while others opt for the local and the particular. In a way, these trends are not mutually exclusive, for few things are universal that are not anchored in some specificity, so that many who claim the universal label still find themselves departing from defined geo-cultural, political, and historical contexts. For example, the film *Guimba* (1995) is about tyranny, the abuse of power and privilege, and the resistance to such excesses. These are themes and experiences that are shared by all societies around the world. Similarly, Gaston Kabore's 1997 FESPACO Grand Prize winning film, *Buud Yam*, is about universal features such as love, duty, obligation, struggle, pain, and attachment to family and community. However, it is only through the specificities of their narrative modes, inscriptions of their cultures, the gestures, the languages, the costumes, the music, etc., that any such universal features emerge. So obvious is this fact that it becomes nonproductive most of the time to speak in terms of universal this or universal that!

Many filmmakers are increasingly showing interest in subjects hitherto relatively undeveloped in the past. The muffled allusions to romance, sexuality, and desire characteristic of quite a sizable segment of earlier African cinema have become more pronounced and developed in a few of the recent productions, to the point of even constituting the narrative vehicle of some. Interpersonal relations, romance, bold assertions of sexual and other identities and desires, and the cultural, religious, and other impediments and sanctions to these, the myriad exigencies of a problematic modernity and the formidable challenges of a restless young population now in the tentacles of "devaluation" (*devaluation*), MTV, and a poorly digested African American hip-hop popular culture--these constitute the focus, in one way or another, of films such as *Dakan* (1997) by Mohamed Camara of Guinea, *Essaida* (1996) by Tunisian filmmaker Mohamed Zran, the elegant and somewhat tragic *Machaho* (1996) by Algerian Belcachem Hadjaj, *Mossane* (1996) by Senegalese Safi Faye, *The Blue Eyes of Yonta* (1995) by Flora Gomes of Guinea-Bissau, and *Bab El-Owed City* (1994) and *Salut Cousin* (1996) by Algerian Merzak Allouache, to name just a few. The latter film is a remarkable achievement in its skillful blend of comedy, spectacle, and romance to project a poignant commentary on African immigration to France as well as offer a new vision of African Arab romance and solidarity in

the persons of the Algerian fellow and the Senegalese woman. Another equally compelling achievement is the new film of Jilali Ferhati from Morocco, *Chevaux De Fortune*, a refreshing retake of the perennial theme of the pull and push factors of emigration.

Recent productions also feature a number of works that in some ways continue and build on trends and orientations that were the hallmarks of the 70's and 80's. The socio-political commentary, the interrogations of cultural practices and customs, especially their exploitation and abuse for individual profit, and the indictment of inequity and repression are themes that resurface in some of the new films. *Tableau Feraille* (1996) by Senegalese Moussa Sene Absa looks at the question of culture, politics, and gender in the context of contemporary post-devaluation urban Senegal, while Adama Drabo of Mali uses reversal as a narrative and structuring device in his new film *Taafé Fanga* (1997) to interrogate the issue of gender in a highly amusing and effective fashion. Drabo's film provokes a rethinking of gender roles as natural, and instead teases us to consider them as social constructs. The film immerses us in certain aspects of Dogon culture in similar ways that Gaston Kabore's latest film, *Buud Yam*, deploys a quest motif as a structuring device to chronicle the eco-cultural diversity of Burkina Faso within the framework of Wend Kuuni's search for the medical practitioner to cure her adopted sister, Pognere. This "sequel" to Kabore's first film is evidence of a certain continuity in African film subjects and styles. In fact, one can draw parallels between *Buud Yam*, Safi Faye's *Mossane*, and Flora Gomes' *Po Di Sangio* (1996) to the extent to which all three mine their respective societies' repertoire of myths and narrative styles to inform their films.

The subject of African history continues to command the attention of African filmmakers as they continue the task of making sense of the distant and recent past in ways that speak to the present and the future in significant ways. In addition to Tunisian filmmaker Moufida Tlatl's elegant *Les Silences Du Palais*, set in the time of the last Tunisian monarchs, and Haile Gerima's record-setting film *Sankofa* on slavery, two young Ethiopian filmmakers have recently contributed two technically refined and analytically sophisticated reappraisals of the last two decades of the Ethiopian experience with a dying feudal monarchy and a repressive military dictatorship. Yemane Demissie's *Tumult* (1996) and Salem Mekuria's *Deluge* (1996) engage these aspects of the Ethiopian experience with a great deal of invention, imagination, and nuance. Also worth noting is the recent "re-vision" of the Algerian war of independence by Rachida Krim in her acclaimed film *Sous Les Pieds Des Femmes* (*Where Women Tread*).

Like Demissie, Mekuria, and Krim, Cameroonian Jean-Marie Teno and Balutu Kanyinda from the Democratic Republic of Congo (ex-Zaire) also detail their perspectives on dictatorship, violence, repression, and struggle in their countries in the post-independence moment. Teno's first long feature, *Clando* (1996), builds on the foundation of his impressive documentary work on various aspects of life in Cameroon under former President Ahmadou Ahidjo and current president Paul Biya. In *Clando*, Teno delves further into the geography and operations of repression and the strategies deployed by people to resist and negotiate such forces both in Cameroon and among Cameroonian immigrants in Germany. BaluLu's *Le Damier* (1997) is, without doubt, one of the most inventive films to come out of African cinema in recent years. A fine blend of play, power, and politics, the film ingeniously exploits the liberating aspect of the popular game of draught (a version of chess), a leveling device, and a space where boundaries crumble, as a vehicle through which the oppressed talk back, insult, and humiliate the

oppressor. The defeat of the head of state (figured as Mobutu Sese Seko) at the hands of the lowly champion from the ghetto is somewhat prophetic of what was in store for Mobutu.

Aristotle's Plot

(1996) by Cameroonian filmmaker Jean-Pierre Bekolo deals with the subject of cinema itself, more particularly, cinema in Africa and cinema by Africans. A meta-discourse on cinema, this film also uses play to deploy a cast of characters with names like Van Danune, Schwartznegger, Bruce Lee, cinema, cineaste and references to specific African filmmakers such as Safi Faye, Ousmane Sembene, and Souleyemane Cissé. The film interrogates the state and direction of cinema in Africa, the prevalence of non-African films on African screens, and the absence and presumed unpopularity of African films with African audiences. Underneath the playful surface of this film, which uses English and a South African cast of actors, is a compelling set of challenges and provocations from a young filmmaker to African filmmakers and observers, and it is done using an approach and style generally associated with avant-gardist and post-modernist tendencies.

Recent activity in the "New" South Africa will no doubt bring new dimensions to the already complex situation and questions of race and belonging, in particular. The work by white, anglo and Afrikaaner filmmakers from South Africa, such as Michael Harmon's *noire Wheels and Deal* (1991), the late Manie van Rensburg's comedy *Taxi To Soweto* (1995), Ian Kerkoff's bold and explicitly gay *Nice To Meet You, Please Don't Rape Me* (formerly titled *Confessions of A Yeoville Rapist* (1995), David Lister's comedy *Soweto Green* (1963), and *Jump The Gun* (1997) by Les Blair of Britain, the M-NET supported productions like *Letting Go* (1997) and *The Sexy Girls* (1997) will most likely rekindle debates on the place of white filmmakers in African cinema.

No doubt, as we draw closer to the *fin de siècle*, many of the seminal questions and themes raised in Bekolo's film and similar ones in the numerous other fore and outlets dedicated to African cinema will be debated and discussed with more urgency and purpose. For many are the voices that are sincerely and persistently calling for imaginative and sustainable responses to the multi-faceted challenges to African cinema in a coming age of technological hegemony and an increasingly savage global competition. The mixed bag that has been the lot of African cinema in the 90's could very well turn out to be a catalyst for different and more productive paths.

Note: I would like to acknowledge the support of the Howard University Sponsored Research Program in the Social Sciences, Humanities, and Education which provided a generous grant for me to travel to Zimbabwe and South Africa in July and August, 1997. A previous grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (1994-1995) also helped me to gather materials and undertake interviews that inform this article.