



Perspectives on the City from Film

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AFRICAN CINEMA has always been closely related to the African city, as an art form made by urbanised people for a primarily urban audience. It's no surprise that the city has been a principal theme of the films. The ways the theme has been handled have been shaped by the different structures of production through which the films come into being.

Jonathan Haynes

On one end of the spectrum of production structures we have the recent boom in Nigerian features shot on video and distributed on video cassettes. Resolutely commercial in orientation, the dominant image of the city they provide is of a lavish, opulent lifestyle actually lived only by a tiny elite, but which represents the desires and anxieties of a broad heterogeneous mass of urban viewers. In many ways these videos are informed by popular consciousness: the prevalence of magical themes is the most obvious example, but underneath their glamorous surfaces one can find many others.

At the other end of the spectrum are films made in a realist style, which should perhaps be called neo-realist after the post-war Italian style which became massively influential in Latin America and elsewhere in the Third World, wherever filmmakers felt the need to break with the glamorous style of Hollywood in order to record the impoverished and oppressed condition of their nation. The film which inaugurated African cinema, Ousmane Sembene's *BOROM SARRET* (Senegal, 1963), is in this mode: the story of a poor horse-cart driver who is gradually destroyed by a modern city which he is ill-equipped to understand. The aim of such films is to show African audiences images of their own lives, together with an analysis which will help to produce a more or less revolutionary transformation of society. Much of the cinema produced in Francophone African countries has had this character, including a number of very distinguished works. The paradox which has always beset this kind of filmmaking (not only in Africa) is that the popular audience whom the more or less intellectual and politically-motivated filmmaker wants to reach is often not terribly interested in paying to see images of their own poverty, with which they are already too familiar.

The film I would like to discuss in some detail, because it supplies an unusually full and complex image of the African city, is *LES GUERISSEURS* (Cote d'Ivoire, 1988), written and directed by Sijiri (a.k.a. Sidiki) Bakaba. The film has also been released under the titles *DERIVE SUR CFA* and *ADUEFUE, THE LORDS OF THE STREET*. This variety of titles itself points to the fact that the film is, like Africa's cities, heterogeneous, syncretic, and unstable in point of view. ('Guerir', in Ivoirean pidgin, means to bribe, to give or loan money, to please a lover, or to threaten; because all this would be lost on French audiences, it was given another title for French release, which again would be incomprehensible to Anglophones not familiar with the French West African currency.)

The structures through which the film was produced are mixed, and lie somewhere in the middle of the spectrum sketched in above. Most of the money was put up by the director himself, along with an Ivoirean and a private French co-producer. Because Sijiri Bakaba has been acting and directing in the National Theatre of Cote d'Ivoire since the age of 13, he was well known to the government, which was very helpful in providing the use of a sports stadium, a helicopter for aerial shots, and so forth. The government of Burkina Faso provided a camera, as part of their support for pan-African filmmaking. Other grants came from the French Ministry of Cooperation and Development, and the Italian Catholic NGO COE. In spite of all this official and foreign support, the film (like those of

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Bakaba's compatriot Henri Duparc) feels slickly commercial in its orientation. It has a thriller plot, and the cast is studded with bankable stars from the Ivoirean entertainment world: the main role is played by television personality Georges T. Benson, and other actors include Bakaba himself, the veteran director Roger Balla N'Goan, and the boxer-turned-reggae musician Waby Spider. Two of the biggest African musical stars, Salif Keita and Alpha Blondy, appear as themselves.

The main plot centres on Kadjo, an elite and culturally alienated businessman who is in debt to a wealthy traditional trader, El Hadji Nana Kiakite. Kadjo is also having an affair with the El Hadji's daughter. Kadjo enters into a conspiracy to rob an armoured car full of money with a couple of French gangsters, one of whom runs a nightclub and prostitution ring, and the nightclub bouncer Attila (a popular hero in his popular neighborhood). After the robbery, the Frenchmen kill Attila. Full of horror and remorse, Kadjo flees to the house of his father, an Akan traditional ruler, who negotiates for him to spend time in prison but eventually be released — in time, as it turns out, to attend the wedding of El Hadji's daughter.

This plot summary hardly suggests the social panorama the film gives us, across several distinct but overlapping social environments. There is Kadjo's extremely Europeanized lifestyle, shared by his wife and her friends, who in a scene in a beauty parlour talk of their shopping trips to Paris and mock African ways. Kadjo's parents' house, on the other hand, provides a vision of traditional Akan royal splendour and ceremony. El Hadji's compound also provides an image of traditional community, on the Islamic model. The Lebanese-run nightclub where the French gangster Tony hangs out, with its fake Soudanese architectural motifs and multi-racial dancers, is a haunt for expatriates. Attila the bouncer is part of a street gang who have adopted personae from imported films: a wild west Mexican, karate martial artist, Rastafarian, and so on. There is a wonderful scene set in a lower-class bar, where people of all classes come to drink. The scene is dominated by Sijiri Bakaba as 'The President', a destitute drunk, and gives us a rich dose of popular speech and attitudes — a cynical pidgin commentary on politics and the state of the nation, among other things.

Bakaba says the city is the main character of the film, which reflects his own fear and fascination at coming to the city from a country town for the first time at the age of 13 — a shock from which he has still not completely recovered. He calls it 'Katakataville' ('Confusiantown') — it is a generalized African city, Abidjan/ Dakar/ Kinshasa/ Lagos (remarks after a screening of the film at Lincoln Center, New York, April 1996). But the film also seems specifically Ivoirian, and not just because it is full of Abidjan landmarks. Of all African films it is perhaps closest to the contemporary neo-colonial interface, reflecting the Cote d'Ivoire's own situation. One form this takes is the venerable theme of cultural alienation, illustrated most clearly by Kadjo's neurotic behavior when a little white boy, friend to his son, eats a meal with his family. The film is full of French people — the gangsters have major roles, and we see a lot of the world they inhabit. The port and the airport which connect Africa with Europe are important locations, and, even rarer in African cinema, they are shot in a cinematic style which participates, as Western films do, in the powers of large-scale modern technology. The clearest example is when the Frenchman Tony oversees the unloading of a fancy red Toyota sports car from a ship, and then is tracked by an aerial shot from a helicopter as he drives it away.

The whole pace and feel of the film, with its quick nervous camera movements and editing, keyed to the thriller plot, are more 'Western' than in any but a handful of African films. But the film is also full of traditional African resources and sensibility. The Voice of Tradition breaks through repeatedly. Often it breaks through onto Kadjo: he is spooked by an African mask decorating his westernized sitting room, and is overcome by some spiritual terror which causes him to run off while sitting in Tony's red Toyota; the same thing happens while listening to Salif Keita singing in the nightclub, after planning the robbery ('Don't be taken in by worldly pleasures, money is treacherous'). When he breaks down after committing the crime, his reintegration comes through his traditional community. The way the episode revealing his royal traditional identity is handled violates the codes of Hollywood cinema, which would not have allowed so important a part of his identity to be withheld until so late in the film. It is as if

Kadjo's exemplary African identity, containing business, criminality and royalty among its layers, could not be expressed through purely Western procedures.

African moral wisdom is crystallized by the music of which the film is so full. Over the opening credit, a griot accompanied by kora music sings in Mandingo: Yesterday belonged to your ancestors, today is yours, tomorrow is in God's hands. God gives us three days: the first he does things for us; the second he helps us; the third we're on our own. In the nightclub, Salif Keita sings on the theme 'Only God has power'; he appears again at the end of the film, as himself, honoured by griots, at the wedding of El Hadji's daughter. When Kadjo is in prison we get a visionary scene of the reggae star Alpha Blondy, attired in Egyptian get-up on the shore, while ships go by and an off-shore oil rig is shot from the air, singing to a crowd 'God will destroy all the wisdom of this world.' Earlier, one of the French gangsters listening to the radio in his room in a fancy tourist resort hears Alpha Blondy's pan-African anthem 'Afriki', and the film then cuts to the singer performing the number in a popular open-air club: 'At dawn we left the Dark Continent to wander the streets of Kingston, with the Dioulas, all the Betes, Oulofs, Ashantis. Here we are in Jamaica in the heart of Africa.'

This transcendent denunciatory moral and spiritual position forms a fundamental part of the African cultural reaction to the modern city. It stands against the social mess we see, where the theme of corruption — the 'guerisseurs' — is what links each social scene. But the musicians aren't outside this society either — traditionally their social position is neither removed nor elevated. Salif Keita appears in the nightclub (looking about righteously) and is a guest at the wedding, and Alpha Blondy is the brother of the drunk 'Mr. President' and appears in the bar scene with him, necking with a girl of uncertain respectability. Another patron with whom they are quarrelling calls them a 'family of vagabonds, singers, rastas'. Although the spiritual force the musicians represent is traditional, they are not necessarily so; they are strung out along a continuum, from the traditional griot of the opening through Salif Keita to the rasta Alpha Blondy, who comes out of a fully syncretic, urban popular culture.

African oral narrative patterns, which tend towards clear oppositions between good and evil and the statement of a simple moral, shape the story of the film, particularly as the French are demonized and Kadjo's experience turns into an allegorical psychodrama about returning to tradition. This moralism is predictable and simplistic, but it seems integral to the film and authentic in the sense of representing the consciousness of a popular African audience.

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What it does not do is bring real closure. The film does not end with Kadjo's spiritual reformation, it ends with his release from prison in time for the wedding of El Hadji's daughter, with whom he seems to plan to continue his adulterous relationship. The society we see celebrating the wedding is as unredeemed as ever, a corrupt ruling elite of 'guerisseurs.' Nothing has changed. At the very end, not for the first time, a riddling question is put: what always changes and is always the same? The answer is: Africa.

Modern African urban society is too complex, dense, and opaque to be reduced to the canons of traditional African or Western storytelling, or to simple moral or political formulations. But this is not to say that comprehensive descriptions are not possible.

At about the same time as the film there appeared a book by the French political scientist Jean-Francois Bayart, *THE STATE IN AFRICA: THE POLITICS OF THE BELLY*. The themes are remarkably the same. Bayart describes corruption not as an aberration in African society, nor as simply a wickedness perpetrated by a small ruling elite, but as a basic system of social organization that permeates all levels. Dubious about the categories of dependency theory, such as the 'comprador bourgeoisie,' Bayart points to what he calls the 'reciprocal assimilation of elites' — the formation of a ruling block out of heterogeneous groups, represented in the film by the traditional wealth and status of the El Hadji, Kadjo's modern entrepreneurialism, and so on — the role of the State (crucial for Bayart) is only hinted at satirically in the film.

Also important in Bayart's book are the concepts of extraversion (the competition within African societies for resources coming from without) and syncretism (the fundamentally hybrid character of modern Africa, and especially of its cities — a theme shared by the theories of the African 'popular arts' summarized and developed by Karin Barber). These concepts support a notion of Africa's history (even in the colonial and post-colonial periods) as being something Africans have made themselves, emmeshed with but not simply dominated by foreign powers and influences. As I have said, the film gives an

unusually full treatment of African-European relations. Much of this treatment is more hostile and emotionally loaded than Bayart's theory: the theme of Kadjo's cultural alienation, of course, but also the handling of the French gangsters, who, in what might be an allegory of the relations of international capitalism, cynically manipulate the whole situation in Africa in order to extract money which will be pumped into the international drug trade. But cutting across the grain of these aspects of the film is the presentation of the street gang, a fine example of syncretic popular culture. The highly theatrical play with international film imagery by the gang members is a mode through which they gain the adulation of their neighbourhood, which is part of what makes them the 'lords of the streets.' Popular urban consciousness has typically adopted foreign elements without the neurotic anxieties of the educated elite. The gang is used to working with the Frenchman Tony, and seems sympathetic to a protest against 'anti-white racism' by his entourage when Tony is arrested and deported for the robbery and the murder of the gang's own member Attila.

Bayart is also a theoretician of an African 'politique par le bas' — a popular resistance to oppression embedded in the culture of everyday life, as in the bar scene in the film. But he is not optimistic about the prospects for decisive political and social change, arising from this or any other source, given the deeply rooted (he calls it 'rhizomatic') structure of the 'politics of the belly.' The film also leaves us with the lesson that even as things always change in Africa, they are always the same. The problem is not just in any one place, it is everywhere, and the solution (an effective solution, as opposed to oppositional ideological resources) is not locatable anywhere in particular.

What the film gives us is a sense for what it is to live in such a situation, which though permanent is also unstable, apt to produce disgust and nausea and psychological crises. But then life goes on, the crises metabolized (as Attila's death is absorbed by his friends as well as by Kadjo). The film absorbs the contradictions, excesses, and corruptions of urban experience, maintaining its curiosity and desire for the variousness and plenitude of the city. **GR**

Notes

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