

Towards a Philosophy of African Cinema

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the nature of African cinema and the film-makers' responsibility to the African Society, and how the consciousness of that responsibility based on African world views can be used to enable the society realize its highest goals and aspirations.

It advocates the use of cinema, other mass media, human and material resources to fight Euro-American media distortions of the African heritage and reality. They should also be used to liberate Africa permanently from Euro-American market control over the continent.

African culture, according to the article, should be the theoretical basis for a critical investigation and assessment of the African cinema. There is also the burning need to recognize the values of African cinema, to see it in a new light, to situate it within the complex movement of thought of the cultural milieu which produced it.

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Vers une Philosophie du cinéma Africain

RESUME

Cet article explore la nature du cinéma africain et la responsabilité du cinéaste envers la société Africaine, et la manière dont la conscience de cette responsabilité basée sur les conceptions africaines du

monde peut être utilisée pour amener la société à réaliser les buts et aspirations les plus importants.

Il préconise l'utilisation du cinéma, des autres mass media des ressources humaines et matérielles pour combattre les déformations euro-américaines de l'héritage et de réalité africaine.

On devrait aussi les utiliser d'une façon permanente pour libérer l'Afrique du contrôle du marché euro-américain sur le continent.

Selon l'article, la culture africaine devrait être la base d'une investigation et d'une évaluation critiques du cinéma africain. Il y a aussi un besoin pressant de reconnaître les valeurs du cinéma africain, de le regarder sous un nouveau jour, de le situer dans le mouvement complexe de pensée du milieu culturel qui le produit.

The aim of this paper is to suggest a number of avenues by which the outstanding problems of African cinematic aesthetics might be fruitfully approached. We shall attempt to explore the nature of African cinema and its responsibility to African society, and how the consciousness of that responsibility based on African world views has been used to enable the society realize its highest goals and aspirations.

The films of Paulin S Vieyre (Senegal), Ousmane Sembene (Senegal), Ola Balogun (Nigeria), Wole Soyinka (Nigeria), Sanya Dosunmu (Nigeria), Soulemane Cisse (Mali), Iraore Issa Falaba (Mali), Jean Pierre Dikongue-Pipa (Cameroun), Daniel Kamwa (Cameroun), Pascal Abikanlou (Benin), Augustin Roch T. Taoko (Burkina Fasso), Bassori Timoty (Ivory Coast), Sebastien Kamba (Congo), and other African cineastes including this author have been used as paradigms to illustrate the philosophical orientations of African cinema and the premise of African cinematographic commitments and excursions. We hope that this will enable us to understand the African filmmakers' adaptive strategies and prognoses.

Philosophy in this context is a way of thinking and a way of life, an activity that is done, not just what is written or read. African philosophy concerns

"itself with the way in which African peoples of the past and the present make sense of their existence, of their destiny and of the world in which they live".¹

The African cinema is theory-based and the understanding of the philosophy on which this theory is based will lead to better understanding and interpretation of the forms and functions of African cinema. We must know what a sign means before we could read it.

"Unless we understand the code or mode of expression which permits meaning to exist in the cinema, we are condemned to massive imprecision and nebulosity in film criticism, an unfounded reliance on intuition and momentary impressions".²

The forces of history and culture of Africa are bound to give the cinema in Africa a different profile from that in other regions of the world. African philosophy or world view is older than its recorded history and originated with the development of Africans. Every African cinema is a cultural encyclopedia.

The African cineaste is like a griot, he tells his audience the problems of the society. It is his responsibility to identify these problems. He is the spokesman of the community, for it is believed that no society altogether knows its own heart, and by falling short in this type of knowledge, a community is certain to deceive itself on anything in connection with itself. This type of ignorance means social death.

The griot's pronouncement is the community's medicine for the worst disease of the mind, the corruption of the consciousness. The African cineaste's films are inspired by social convictions most sincerely held, his moral and intellectual faculties are essential instruments but they are certainly no less important than his ability to handle the camera. His world view is conditioned by his origins, life experiences and culture and these give him his angle of vision. African cineaste is a part of the social order in which he matures and serves. And his film is a resume of an African man in the activities of his society, just as the Eisenstein's cinema and theory of 'montage' exist within the marxist concept of dialectics. African cinema places emphasis on the sacred ceremony which draws persons together in fellowship and communality.

This relationship of the cinema as an art to social life in Africa is based on the fact that the artist is made for the society. That is, art to assist the development of the society. Ousmane Sembene, the 'Father of African cinema', believes that the film must communicate with African audiences and that there is a virtue or necessity in the substance, form and technique needed for the communication of the artist's view point. African artworks are formulated around certain

frameworks or philosophical intent. The aesthetics of presentation of the artistic medium is usually informed by the artists' social vision.

Ousmane Sembene demonstrated this view in his films. In one of his films titled *Xala*, which is based on African nationalism and contemporary political developments, he shows a distinction between dreams and realities. The dream is that when independence is achieved, development will follow. The struggle for independence is carried out by the political elites on behalf of the masses without any coherent ideological base. The political elites win the case for independence. It is later demonstrated in this film that the attainment of independence is not the end of nationalistic struggle. He uses this film to demonstrate the plight of the daily struggles of African masses and the dehumanising treatment of the neo-colonial rulers. *Xala* is not a mere dramatization of historical materials but an interpretation of history.

We could observe from *Xala* that the experiences which formed part of Ousmane Sembene's background cannot be separated from his live participation as a victim of exploitation both by the colonial master and their neo-colonial stooges. The African collaborative efforts are portrayed in this film as capable of saving itself by collective will. This film is linked to the universal tasks of the African masses.

African cinema opens up the aesthetic potential of reality and reveals its beauty while it uncovers the conflicts and debunks the ugly. The African cinema is not based on principles invented by anybody but the cinema expresses the historical movements going on before us. This cinema is conditioned by motivations, environments and experiences; it is rooted in Africa and is geared towards the preservation and improvement of the African personality and culture. African cinema is an instrumental force, a positive progressive force in the society of its time. The cinema is a social phenomenon, a communal art, a collaborative art and public activity. The African cinema keeps pace with and is responsive to the cultural differences and developments in the society which produced the cinema and other modes of communication and expression.

The Critics:

Many film analysts have made erratic conclusions, wild generalizations and drawn erroneous inferences from data provided by film specialists who have had little or no experience of Africa. When these critics write about African cinema, they tend to think that every man on earth belongs to one culture and this man stores his information into the film with no intervening variables. It seems these critics have forgotten the principle of selectivity. The individual makes use of information he finds meaningful and which confirms his pre-disposition. The film audience does not live hermetically sealed from the past experiences or from the world around it. We would like to stress here that the evolution of this type of theory and analysis of African film is tied to the kind of relationship that exists between the place where the thoughts are conceived and the place where the films are made.

The cinema as a work of art is a complex structure and a considerable degree of analysis and understanding is possible and indeed essential before we can arrive at those elements of simple judgement of which its total effect is composed. Our creative imagination exists in a mental and emotional fog and the object of critique is to disperse the fog so that things may stand out sharply and clearly. Analytical attitude is an endless voyage of exploration and discovery. We cannot begin to enjoy an art until we understand its language. The expositions (behaviour, thoughts and feelings) of the character should emphasize the premise of the film in cinematographic language. The technique is only a means to achieve the filmmaker's premise. More importantly, it is the cineaste's purpose which conditions the standards by which he is judged, not his skill and his success in achieving it.

On technical aspects of the African cinema, we may also have to take into account the particular circumstances of its production or the personalities of those engaged in it. The cineaste cannot achieve miracles when he is working under a very poor cinematographic atmosphere and with bad cinematographic materials. The difficult conditions of film production in Africa is enough to affect the creative abilities of the African cineastes. They work in a context where there is no source of funding for the film production. They work

under what seems impossible conditions and out of love for their profession.

Film information or content is not an objective part of the film production but a reflection of the position of the group which stood behind its production or reflecting their definite social interest. This type of analysis of African cinema in the foreign press must be compared with the foreign policy of the country in which the particular periodical is published.

African cinema is not only a diagnosis but a therapy. African cineastes are in the circle of the initiates and are among the ancestors and the living. This is a society where the dead are not only born out of the dreams of the living but the living are the reincarnations of the dead. They listen to the voices of their ancestors which come to as a source of their culture. There is a relationship between any work of art and its age, also with the place in which it takes place. The African cineaste is not a passive copy made from the existing social forms but a creative and active being. It is his responsibility to create the conditions of his life and development. The African cinema is rooted in the context of history. The cinema is placed in the service of the people and it is impossible to isolate African cinema from the historical path of Africa. Cinema is art, and the development of art is influenced by tasks set by the society.

"The aim of creation is a factor which conditions the development of the creative process, a social activity and determines the meaning and direction of creative work and the responsibility of the artist.³

African cinematographers are attracted to the traditions of their people; they use myth, history, music, dance and songs. The simplicity of plot and language has gone a long way into bringing people to the cinema. The social and cultural resume in these films are utilized to make strong pronouncements on the political and moral deprivation of men in African society. The African cinema evokes the past, in order to effectively look at the present as well as to protect the future. The problems created by slavery, colonization and neo-colonization are so apparent that the African cineaste cannot afford to dwell in the inner world or engage in futile analysis of some neurosis. The situation in African is critical

and if the cinema is to perform its role in African societies, it must be critical. The cinema as a means of education is supposed to improve men and society, serve to expose error and to advance the truth. Since every member of the society takes an active part in cultural life, they are the creators of cultural values. In Africa, man is the aim of production and the people are the basic motivators of the cultural process. The opposite is the case in Western cultures where production is the aim of man. The rich made it almost impossible in Western cultures for the poor to gain access to education and cultural values, thereby making them captives of false ideas and concepts.

Western critics have blamed African cinematographers for making films that they said 'are not of international standards' because they lack international themes. We do not know if International is another word for Europe and America. African cinematographers are Africans who happen to make films, and not filmmakers who happened to be Africans. Film-making is a profession or vocation like those of doctors, teachers or lawyers and could only become a way of life when established within a concept and identity compatible with the inner workings of the self.

If we agree that Africans are unique, and an interesting part of the world's people, then there is a contradiction in the argument that African films lack international themes. African themes expressed in these films enable the peoples of the world who watch them to become truly international. The African cinematographer has a responsibility to his community, he is a part of African society and his fate is mirrored in that society and everyone of his films is calculated to move his people towards progress. African cinema provides cultural format for the discovery and description of African identity. African cinema is purposive and a reflection of reality.

Western critics laid much more emphasis on metalanguage and on abstract speculative constructions than on reality. This speculative philosophy cannot withstand analysis because there is no empirical data put forward to corroborate the abstract constructions. African cinema rests on African values, the underlying ideas are not invented by the Europeans and Americans. This is unacceptable, except if we want to close our eyes to history and prove ourselves

irresponsible men. Foreign critics evaluate African cinema on foreign theories. These theories exist on their own and have nothing to do with the practice of film in Africa. This is an intellectual activity, it has its reasons, but does not necessarily have much relations with the real world. How can we fully appreciate the defects and merits of a film, when we do not know the nature and the purpose of the film?

Westerners know too much of their cultures and know too little or nothing of African culture. When they are told of African communal imagination, they comprehend it in terms of Durkheim's group imagination. The African actor's expression of traditional signs are perceived in relation to classical Chinese theatre. The African ancestral roots are interpreted in terms of Nietzsche's mythical soul. The worst of the situation is that some African writers follow the footsteps of their white masters.

"They inwardly flatter themselves by identifying with European bourgeoisie which is their model for everything. But I detest these references to Europe. They irk me because they are false. They created confusion in the people's minds and justify a whole series of positions and reactions which are negatives.... The European critics are as much charlatans as their local representatives".⁴

Ousmane Sembene remarked that "it is these same Europeans who colonized you and have always exploited you, both you and your wealth, without ever consulting you about it".⁵

The problems of the African cinema are the problems of Africa. One of these problems is *MAN-POWER*. It is better understood when the word *MAN-POWER* is hyphenated. We have developed the power and neglected the man. The power is so powerful and the man is too weak to carry the power. And when this 'powerful' power is bestowed on the weak man, he is bound to fall. This is the result of colonization which inflicted a disease on Africans, that I call *COLMENTS* (*COLONIAL MENTALITY SYNDROME*). It is because of *COLMENTS* that some African cinema critics have produced imaginative literature which created a world and events which never existed or never can. Crisis is brewing among our

people and there is the need to destroy the slave and colonial mentalities which have inhibited our development. This is the time to give birth to a new man who negates and stands away from the old.

There is also the African governments' attitude and the shortage of trained cinema scholars with an active interest in expanding the horizon of knowledge and enquiry in the field. Researchers in Europe and America have contributed their uses of the cinema as a tool of media imperialism. There is the need for the African cinema scholar to provide a frame of reference, because conceptualizations based on American and European theoretical and methodological assumptions are not only dangerous but deadly. The problem is more complicated because some African critics have followed the footsteps of their white masters. It is difficult to reverse the devotion of a slave in anyone who has been educated in the spirit of slavery. "There was slavery which lasted for almost three centuries, and then there was colonialism, which lasted for more than a century. That has destroyed all African states and the fragments of state which different ethnic groups had tried to build or preserve ... "We are all born from slavery into slavery ... Our state of normalcy was obedience. It was normal for the white man to give us orders and it was normal for us to obey him".⁶ African cinema questions our situation in the world.

The critic is a destroyer and at the same time a builder. The critique is like a loaded gun, the after effects of its use determine the sanity or insanity of its possessor. When the Japanese film *Rashomon* was released in Tokyo, the Japanese audience saw nothing much in the film. The same film was well received by the French critics and it was very successful in the French Box office. The success of this film in France encouraged the Japanese to find out the reason for this success and they later discovered the film to be very good.

These problems could be reduced if the Western critics would stop parading a derelict phantom of aesthetics, robbed of immediacy and failing in energy and paralysed by Western bias. Our guiding principle has been that, the cinema does not necessarily have to take place in a world of its own, a closed venture from which cultural concepts and methods are expelled.

Film Content

Kongi's Harvest, a film version of Wole Soyinka's play of the same title is based on the struggle between the old traditional culture and the new culture. The people are caught in between and they try to find their way out which took the form of violent struggle.

Dinner with the Devil, a film of Sanya Dosunmu, highlighted the gravity of corruption and gross abuse of office. *Cry Freedom*, a film of Ola Balogun, "sets out to be educative about certain vital aspects of the African liberation struggle ...

It addresses issues in basically humanistic and worldwide terms... Ola Balogun added that "I made no apologies for the fact that my film is neither a Kungfu nor a sex oriented movie. I am sure that the mature critic will understand why an African film on such a vitally important theme as the African liberation should avoid excess romantic intrigue and unnecessary violence of a nature would be unsuitable for mass audience ... My deeply held conviction is that the conquest of formal political independence is only the first step towards the true emancipation of the peoples of Africa. Our people need to be liberated not only from foreign domination but also from domestic tyranny and homebred exploitation".⁷

Black Goddess, a film of Ola Balogun, traces the Yoruba elements in Brazilian culture. *Cry Freedom*, *Money Power* by Ola Balogun, *Blues for a Prodigal*, by Wole Soyinka, *Xala* of Ousmane Sembene, *Finye* of Soulemane Cisse raised the consciousness of the down trodden African people against injustice and exploitation. African cinema responds to situations. *Dr. Oyenusi*, a film by Eddie Ugbomah and Balogun's *Money Power* treat topical issues in African societies. Ben Dioguy's film *UN Hommes, Des Femmes* (1980) is based on African polygamy and its problems. Paulin S. Vieyra in 1981, treated the problems of military coups d'etat in his film *En Residence Surveillee*. The problems of the old griot and the tradition was recognized in 1983 by Momar Thiam in his film *La Troubadour*. Theirno Sow demonstrated in his film *L'Oeil* (1982) that the military coup is done by violence.

Jean Pierre Dikongue-Pipa's film *Muna Moto* is based on forced marriage in Douala, where the ability to have a wife is based on much money not on love. The money introduced by

the colonial masters have alienated human values. And the contact between the cultures of Africa and those of the colonial masters has confused values.

Another film of Dikongue-Pipa treated the case of a young girl who ran away from the village to the city and became a prostitute in an attempt to obtain her so-called liberty. Daniel Kamwa made his film *Pousse*, in 1975 based on bride price paid by a drug pusher. The European critics were not favourable to this film. But the film was a financial success and it was watched by 700,000 people.

Pousse Pousse a été vu par 700,000 spectateurs, c'est le best seller du cinéma de toute l'Afrique noire".⁸

Ousmane Sembene, the 'father' of African cinema's first documentary film, *Borom Sarret*, treats injustice and exploitation in Africa. *Nalaye*, another film of Sembene, is on a Griot who is a witness of the decadence of moeurs of his village. His other film *La Noire* is a story of a Senegalese girl who works for a European family as a maid in Europe. It is based on exploitation. *Le Mandat* is another of Sembene's film based on exploitation and bureaucracy. *Xala* is the film where Sembene accused the neo-colonial bourgeois of corruption and exploitation. Ousmane Sembene used the film *Emitai* to treat the social problems based on historical facts of the Diola people of Casamance in Senegal. This film stressed the importance of traditional religion. *Karim* is another Senegalese film by Momar Thiam. It is an adaptation of a book by Ousmane Soce Diop. The book treated life in Senegal in the year 1930s.

The Malian filmmaker, Traore Issa Falaba directed a film titled *Nous Sommes tous coupable* in 1980. This film was based on social inequality. Another, Milian Soulemane Cisse, directed *Den Muso* in 1978, *Baara* in 1978 and *Finye* or *Le Vent* in 1982. The three films have a common theme based on the class struggle in Africa. Professionally, he is probably a disciple of Ousmane Sembene.

Pascal Abikanlou of Benin republic directed a film titled *O Sous le Signe du Voudoun* in 1973. The film treated the power of traditional religion and rural exodus. *Si Les Cavaliers* of Bakabe Mahamane is based on anticolonial resistance. The Burkina cineaste Augustine Roch T Taoko's

film M'BA RAOGO is based on tradition and its abuse. The Congolese, Sebastien Kamba, directed a film titled *La Rancon D'un Alliance* in 1972. The story of the film is based on rivalry between two clans. *Le Logement* a film by this author is based on accommodation problems of African students in France.

Most of these African films are based on cultural and value shocks, polygamy, liberation, exploitation, corruption, colonization, neo-colonization, social inequality, religion, history, bureaucracy, racism, etc. These are the problems of Africa and these problems will continue to be the source of inspiration for African cinema as far as they exist in African society. Plastic arts is not new to Africa. Sculpture and masks are not immobile but presented in movement like masks worn by dancers. This art is not figurative but expressionist, interpreting the reality of the society, so also is the African cinema. The cinema is a means of artistic expression and instrument of culture, its ideological, spiritual and political content is very important.

In appreciating any film by the public, the elements of appreciation are not only the question of syntax, style, direction of the actor(s) or editing, but the theme on which the philosophical assumptions are based. The culture of the critic or the cineaste acts as his frame of reference. African cinema is a cultural force and it is based on unspoken values of African norms. It is inspired by culture, when a talented artist is inspired by wrong idea he ruins his own production.

Conclusion:

This paper serves to encourage the spirit of enquiry, analysis, balanced thinking, impartiality and objectivity. An American film director, King Vidor, watched Sergi Eisenstein's films and found common language in his films. And yet he recognized the fact that Sergi Eisenstein represented the art of another social system. King Vidor understood that Eisenstein was a revolutionary, a Soviet artist and was able to appreciate his work despite the fact that King Vidor did not share his political, ideological or artistic views. This American cineaste did not impose his own values on his Soviet colleagues or measure his work with the yardstick of the artist of the capitalist world.

It is very unfortunate that we often come across a different approach in relation to African cinema. Western critics frequently attempt to impose their own values and to integrate African cinema into the sphere of their own conceptions of art and its aim. African cinema is not a product of the Western philosophy of art but comes from the daily activities of the society. African cineastes draw materials from Africa's philosophical past and reinterpret it in terms of socio economic conditions in whose frame work it develops, as in terms of their own present and future struggles. African cinema is based on the reconstruction of a society torn apart by exploitation, in the form of human slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism. In Africa, the cinema performs concrete social, political and religious functions. Ousmane Sembene remarked:

"So, when I undertook the production of a film like *Xala*, as a militant film producer or supposedly so, or as a citizen who is anxious to accomplish a civic duty, to play a role I accept as mine like a duty to my conscience, what am I supposed to do? 9

The artistic awareness of African cinematographers takes roots from the African worlds. This cinema is an African interpretation of the world.

The rule of the Western press is that any lie about Africa finds an honourable place on the front page, whereas, the truth is found, if at all, in a very inconspicuous corner. The malice and madness of the Western critics are not a sign of strength but a manifestation of impotence. When we look into this distorted mirror, we often draw our conclusions by assuming the opposite, and see admission by reading between lines.

It is now obvious that, there is a need to wage a cultural nationalist war in an African frame of reference against the Western academic establishment. We must fight back with all the resources available. Both human and material resources must be employed for social consciousness and social upliftment. We must ruthlessly fight every lie that is told about Africa, destroy the fog of empty phrases and show the world the naked truth. Africa is chained to the world market and it dictates its terms. There must be a swing in this type of relationship which in historic importance could be compared

to the break-up of the colonial empires. Culture is the ideological background and organizational core of African cinema. Culture is the basis of all human creations. Scientific thoughts are conditioned and stimulated by cultural activities.

African culture should be the theoretical basis for a critical investigation and assessment of African Cinema. African cinema must be located in its setting. There is the burning need to recognize the values of African cinema, to see it in a new light, to situate it in a complex movement of thought of the cultural milieu which produced it.

End Notes

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