Towards the Decolonization of the African Film

by Hyginus Ekwuazi*

Abstract

This paper identifies the inalienable features which characterize the truly indigenous African film. It argues that the pre-eminence of the USA and India in the international movie marketplace translates into the colonization of both the medium and the industry in the importing country. It works out the rubrics for an African aesthetic of the film with examples from the works of leading African film makers.

* Dr. Hyginus Ekwuazi is a lecturer in the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

Vers la Décolonisation du Cinéma Africain

Résumé

Cet article identifie les traits inaliénables qui caractèristent le cinéma indigène africain réel. Il affirme que le rôle important que jouent les USA et l'Inde au sein du marché cinématographique international aboutit à la colonisation des médias et de l'industrie dans le pays importateur. Il formule des propositions pour une esthétique africaine du cinéma avec des exemples tirés des oeuvres des cinématographes africains de premier plan.

Introduction

A random sampling of cinema houses in Ghana, Burkina Faso (Martin, 1982:29)
and Nigeria (Balogun, 1987:106) makes the disquieting revelation that the
distribution/exhibition circuit in Africa exists primarily to service foreign films:
notably American and Indian films.

The intimidating stature of America in the international movie marketplace
can be attributed to certain factors: historical, economic and technological. Ferid
Boughedir (Martin, 1982: 34) has isolated the cluster of historical factors:

(1) 1925: The birth of the Motion Picture Association of America (M.P.A.A.).
This had a far-reaching effect on the industry as it not only restructured the majors,
but also regulated their activities within and without the country.

(2) 1928: The coming of sound. This coincided with the end of World War I,
which left the European economy in a shambles. Only America was able to
completely overhaul her industry, to wire the studios for sound and thus have an
unprecedented advantage over her competitors.

(3) 1946: The end of World War II. By the time Europe came out of the war,
the European economy had become dependent on America; and America was
already dominating the international trade in films. Allied Europe was flooded
with American films.

(4) 1946: The formation of the Motion Picture Export Association of America
(M.P.E.A.A.). The World Wars had both opened up a wide market for America;
this new Association was to cope with the export of films on this wide scale and
at the same time give the exported films whatever leverage they needed abroad.
The M.P.E.A.A., in other words, became a *de facto* 'Ministry of Foreign Affairs'
for the M.P.E.A.A. The A.M.P.E.C.A., an offshoot of the M.P.E.A.A., was
eventually formed in order to penetrate the Anglophone African market.

Complementing these historical factors are the economic and technological
factors. In America, the sources of film financing are well-defined and production
capital resources are more or less limitless. The average American film costs
between $10-$15 million; and mega-budgeting is a characteristic of the industry.
Epics like *Cleopatra, Ben Hur, Star Trek*, etc., can originate only from such a
firm financial base.

No less firm is the technological base: technology has contributed tremendous-
ly to the content and structure of American films, e.g. *Blue Thunder, Superman
III, Tron, Star Wars, E.T., 2001: A Space Odyssey*, etc. The fact is that America
has led the free world in the creation, management and distribution of new
technology (Schiller, 1976:73). And Hollywood has led the world cinema in the

structuring of this new technology into films. And so, one out of every two films bought and sold in the international market place is American.

India, on the other hand, has derived most of her advantages solely from historical factors (Kabir, 1979:1-10).

Only a year after they had invented the cinematograph in 1895, the Lumiere brothers were in India for the exhibition of *L'Arroseur Arrose* and, incidentally, the very first comedy in the new medium: *Feeding the Baby*. The first Indian production, *Phalke's Harishchandra*, was released in 1913. Between 1925 and 1927, as many as 289 features were turned out; in the same period, England recorded 178. By 1939, cinema houses in India numbered 1,265; and there were at least 22 studios.

Judging, then, both by exposure to the medium with the industry's output, and by the facilities available, Nigeria, like any other African country in the 1990s, is nowhere near where India was in the first quarter of this century. As of now, India releases two features per day – about the annual average for many an African country.

In both the U.S.A. and India, film has run its full course: from the periphery of the society, through the centre and back again to the periphery, whereas in Nigeria, as in other African countries, it has, at best, barely left the periphery for the crucial movement to the social centre. Where a country happens to be heavily dependent on another for film supply, certain implications are unavoidable. Where the dependent country happens to have a younger film culture, a different set of implications is called into being.

The least important of these implications is that when the importing country is equipped to build its own industry, it models it on the industry of one or of all its sources of importation. A more crucial implication is the impact on the cultural landscape of the importing country. Equally crucial is the impact, in the importing country, on the medium's mode of signification.

Cultural Colonization of the Importing Country

Every film is an audio-visual cultural encyclopedia and, therefore, a cultural experience. This was borne out clearly to us when we attended the Africa Week Celebrations organized by the Pan African Studies Department of Temple University, Philadelphia, U.S.A. One of the highlights of the week was the screening of *Kongi's Harvest*. During the animated post-screening discussion, it was clear that the largely Afro-American audience had been deeply touched by what they had perceived as the Africanness of the movie: the African concept of family/household; flamboyant dress and the profound respect for elders. Much the same thing had happened in 1972, when the same film had premiered in Washington. Arologun reports that 'the dressing of Oba Danlola's household and those of the people of Isma at the festival changed the view of most Black Americans about the Yoruba *Agbada*. They regarded their own type of *Agbada*,

the butterfly type, neither up nor down, as the authentic Yoruba garment' (Opubor and Nwuneli, 1979:30).

The fact is that every film carries with it a national image; and however arty the film, or however distorted the image of the society that comes across, the 'national face' behind the screen remains all too clearly discernible (Houston, 1963). The beliefs, attitudes and values implicit in any film tend to resonate with those beliefs, attitudes and values which are dominant in the society from which the firm originates (Linton, 1979), Too heavy a reliance on foreign films, as is the case in Africa, in effect becomes cultural enslavement. Against this background, one readily appreciates Kabir's study of the influence of the popular Indian cinema in Africa when he observes that 'such is the impact of Indian films in Senegal a theatre group recently organized an evening show where they performed Indian dances' (Martin, 1982:62).

Ali Mazrui (1980:87), in terms which demand quoting in full, sums up the disastrous consequences of such an enslavement:

> The technology of communication, ranging from the electronic media to publishing, has become at times the declaration of wars on ultimate value. Human aggression and an enjoyment of violence have been sustained and nourished by the abuse of television and film. Restraints on avarice and acquisitiveness have been undermined by the very ethos of capitalism as communicated and over-communicated through its own instruments of dissemination. The natural human weakness of lust has at times been recklessly exploited by the West's technology of communication, with negative consequences for the sacred drive of sexuality. The West's technology of communication has at times undermined in Africa the imperative of moral reciprocity among people. Western culture has eroded some of the principles of collective responsibility in village life and tribal mores. And, finally, the West's technology of communication has often distorted the balance of information and cognition between different societies (1980:87).

The more foreign films pumped into the African landscape, the more the cultural enslavement and the more the dire consequences.

It is significant that Hollywood cannot be divorced from American policy goals particularly in the fragile environment of the balance of power politics of the later part of the century; with the premium now on explanation and persuasion, emphasis has necessarily shifted to cultural diplomacy (Stanton, 1975:12). The film, like all other culture-oriented outputs of the media, belongs with America's cultural diplomacy.

To this end, American government legislation has often been tailored to give the fullest advantage to Hollywood's overseas investments. The Webb-Pomerence Export Trade Act of 1918, by giving American companies operating in foreign markets the freedom of association, fixing prices and allocating customers, smoothed the paths which had been rendered rather thorny and precarious by the Sherman and Clayton anti-trust acts. (Thanks to this act, earnings derived from American film rentals in West Africa tripled in 1967 in spite of the combined

disaster of the Nigerian Civil War and the political instability of Ghana). Under the Informational Media Guaranty Programme (1948), American media conglomerates can easily convert, at lucrative terms, certain foreign monies into the dollar with the proviso, of course, that the information output on which the amount has been earned has been adjudged a conduit for positive elements of American culture. The Revenue Act (1971) makes tax mandatory only for 50 per cent of export earnings. Besides these three acts, there is the government-owned Overseas Private Investment Corporation (1969/71) which, by various means (insurance, loans, etc.), seeks to legitimately maximize profit for American private capital abroad (Schiller, 1976; Mattelart and Siegelaub, 1979).

From the foregoing, it is obvious that the American government sees Hollywood, in general, and the Motion Picture Exporters Association of America (M.P.E.A.A.) in particular, as a cultural conglomerate, a means to an end in its bid to Americanize the world.

Colonization of the Film Medium

Two variants of the African film are reflected in the Algiers Charter on African Cinema. These are the Ousmane Sembene School and the Med Hondo School. Together, they constitute a broad spectrum for anatomizing the state of film art in the continent.

The Ousmane Sembene school believes that:

> African cinema must be conceived in terms of its destination, the post-colonial African public. That this public is conditioned by a form of 'cinema of distraction' and that one should take account of this conditioning on pain of seeing one's 'message' rejected. That in this historical phase it's necessary to retain a form of 'classic' – that's to say, comprehensive narrative – without, however, taking up the noxious cliches of Hollywood cinema (Martin, 1982:83).

The problem here, and it is distressing to the extreme, is that most of the films bracketed within this school do, indeed, end up recycling *the noxious cliches* of Hollywood/Indian cinema. A few examples:

(1) *Son of Africa:* patterned on the American action film. The name of the hero – Agent 007 – says it all.

(2) *Dinner With the Devil*, which, notes Lindsay Barrett, 'is remarkable for being the first Nigerian film to translate common incidents recognizable in day-to-day Nigerian life stylized along the lines of the popular psychological dramas of popular Western cinema' (Opubor and Nwuneli, 1979:7).

(3) *Ajani Ogun:* 'Any Indian film watcher knows that a typical leitmotif of Indian fiction films is the unending presence of snake danger to the damsel in the thick jungle forest and the inevitable timely intervention of the Good Samaritan who often is loved out of gratitude. This hat trick has proved to have successful mass appeal guaranteeing huge box office returns in Indian fiction films. Guru

music and overt sex have helped, too. Balogun found this Indian film commercial appeal to popular taste necessary in *Ajani Ogun*'.

(4) *Money Power/Mosebolatan:* For the so-called Chinese film, everything can be reduced to Kung Fu/Karate: martial arts, in this case, fist fights, choreographed to a split second precision. The thin storyline, the pace and even the deigesis of the film – everything is organized to achieve this precision in the choreography. The fight scene in both *Money Power* and *Mosebolatan* is a rehash of this tradition.

In each of these instances, the issue is cultural colonization: the cultural misconception of the film language or, as Edison Egbe would say, 'filmic cross pollination' (Opubor and Nwuneli, 1979:93). The issue, of course, goes beyond content to embrace form/structure. Thus the other school of the African film, the Med Hondo School, holds very strongly that 'imperialist propaganda doesn't only reside in the content but also in the form of Hollywood cinema. Whence the necessity for anti-imperialist African cinema to find a different form' (Martin, 1982:83).

Working with a host of received opinion from the British Colonial Film Unit, Koenigil (1962:95-105) gives a formalistic/structuralist prescription for the films intended for the African market. Basing his conclusions on what he perceived as 'a fundamental difference of mentality' between the African and European, he stresses the need for *simple films;* and by simple films he means:

> films photographed in natural background, stripped of any cinematographic tricks. The shots should be taken at eye level, with the least possible movement of the camera and reproducing faithfully what the human eye sees. The maximum possible visual continuity should be maintained from scene to scene. Persons, or objects requiring attention should be seen again in the following picture . . . A minimum number of actors should be used because a great number of people on the screen will confuse the viewer. The film should consist almost entirely of long shots or medium close-ups and in much longer sequences than those we are used to seeing with normal techniques. At the intellectual level, they (Africans) need more time to understand, to 'digest' each pictured and series of pictures . . . Let us tell a short plausible story with an actor of his own race, with whom he can identify himself and avoid changing scenery and paraphernalia. The African does not like to look hurriedly at many things at the same time; he loves details . . . give him close-ups and enough time to see well, assimilating each gesture (see also Sellers, 1941:211-5; 1952/3:829-837).

Obviously, then, there was an unmistakable correlation between the position scripted for the black in the larger context of colonial life and the position scripted for the black within the film. Momoh (1989:11) notes that in 1944 alone, Lawrence Reddick, the Blackman, featured in a repertory of films which included: *The Savage African, The Happy Slave, The Devoted Servant, The Corrupt Politician, The Irresponsible Citizen, The Vicious Criminal, The Unhappy Non-White, The Natural Born Musician* and *The Mental Inferior.*

Koenigil's aesthetics for films intended for the African market also calls for 'a definite slow rhythm to the sequence'; and because Africans 'find it difficult to work without the accompaniment of their native rhythms', the more music incorporated in the sound track, the better. No African film has been prescripted on this structure: indeed, one remembers it only when one chances on archival films, e.g. BFU films *Daybreak in Udi*, for instance. The dominant structure of the foreign films that control and structure the viewing experience of the African masses is the Hollywood idiom. This idiom is characterized essentially by:

(a) Rapid camera movement;

(b) Accelerated tempo achieved by rapid cross cutting;

(c) Continuity editing: the 180 system becomes the organizing principle for the *mise-en-cadre*, camera placement and the assembling of the shots;

(d) A pattern of sequencing in which it is considered wrong to move from the shot in one extreme angle to another or from one extreme shot to another; and in which long shots stay on the screen longer than medium shots and medium shots longer than close-ups; and

(e) A braiding of shots which, in the final proportioning, must, for tragedy, assemble more close-ups than any other units of shots, and, for comedy, more long shots than any other units of shot.

This structure has, more or less, all too readily, been recycled into African films – even into the folkloric films. Perhaps the greatest flaw in these folkloric films is in their form: they have yet to work out an authentic cinematic form for their folkloricism; they have yet to marry content to structure.

Besides the recycling syndrome, there are two reasons for this. A good number of the film makers rely on hired equipment from abroad; these hired equipment often come with a foreign crew. Also, those film makers who have received any formal training were trained abroad – where the film-making orientations are indigenous to those cultures.

Towards an African Film Aesthetic

There is a cinema that bears the unmistakable stamp of the Third World. This, coincidentally, is the third cinema which, going beyond the confines of the 'first cinema' (the conventional Hollywood type) and the 'second cinema' (the auteurist cinema of personal, as opposed to communal, expression) counterposes:

> a cinema of characters with a cinema of themes, one of individual with one of the masses, one of auteurs with one of operative groups, a cinema of information, one of escape with one that recaptures the truth, a cinema of passivity with one of aggression. To an institutionalized cinema, it counterposes a guerrilla cinema; to movies as shows or spectacles, it counterposes film act or action; to cinema of destruction, one that is both destructive and constructive; to a cinema made for and by the old kind of human beings, it counterposes a cinema fit for a new kind of

human being, for what each one of us has the possibility of becoming (Cook, 1982:600).

Third World cinema, therefore, is a *gesamtkunstwerk* of the social, the political and the aesthetic. It is a cinema that cannot be divorced from the very peculiar circumstances of its creators. And, more so here than in any other cinema, language should sum up the whole cultural horizon. For 'it is through language that existing social relations are reproduced' (Yearwood, 1982:71).

Japanese film maker, Ozu, noted for his uncompromising cultural politics via the film, has a turn of creative egocentricity which has been a cultural curtain to many a Western critic: his films are shot with the camera at a height of three feet from the ground. Film critic Iwasaki Akira gives the rationale for this:

> Ozu's reasoning . . . is as follows: the Japanese people spend their lives seated on 'tatami' matting spread over the floor; to attempt to view such a life through a camera high up on a tripod is irrational; the eye-level of the Japanese squatting on the 'tatami' becomes, of necessity, the level for all who are to view what goes on around them; therefore, the eye of the camera must also be at this level (Huss and Silverstein, 1982:73).

The viewer, irrespective of his culture of extraction, has to relate to Ozu's films the way a Japanese would. Language sums up the whole cultural horizon.

Those African films which, in intent, content and execution, exhibit this nuanced awareness, belong to the mainstream of Third World cinema. In this cinema, then, we witness a conscious attempt by the film makers to seek out cultural equivalents from their own culture: the stock of references, the signifiers, are all drawn from the indigenous culture.

In such films (which, for us, represent the movement towards the decolonization of the African film) the icons, the codified set of perceptions, lead to interpretative models that are unambiguously African. In Med Hondo's *Soleil O*, in Ben Diogaye Beye's *The Black Prince of St. Germain* and in Baraka's film, *A Thousand and One Hands*, the icons, the stock of cultural references, the cultural indices are unambiguous: the blue-eyed blonde signifies not the beauty it should in European films, but is representative of the cultural imperialism, of the grand deception that is colonization and of the destructive mission of Europe in Africa (Gabriel, 1983). Similarly, in Haile Garim's *Harvest: 3000 Years*, white, the European icon or signifier for untarnished innocence or purity becomes the cultural metaphor for death (Gabriel, 1983). The African mask in Sembene's *Black Girl* has been located on the same cultural-metaphoric level (Martin, 1982:84).

In an oral culture, speech *is* golden; no less premium is placed on seeing than on hearing. The silent film could never have originated from Africa. The context of production of the African film means that film makers dispense with whatever gift or tongues they have to speak the one simple language of the mass of the people. Sembene's *Ceddo* is in Wolof (with English subtitles) and Sembene

swears that even the blind came to see it 'for the wonder of hearing their own language being spoken' (*Africa Now*, June, 1978:25). The significance of the indigenous language here is that it is 'made as pure a reconstruction as possible. Each phrase is like a well-chosen saying, weighted with the significance of its argument' (Martin, 1982:100).

Another distinguishing element in the films is in their tempo. 'We should,' says the film-maker Inoussa Ousseini, 'achieve an African cinema which is more true, which is capable of restoring the true rhythm of African life.'

In Sembene's *Emitai* (where the setting is rural) and *Mandibi* (which has an urban setting) the definition of shots within the filmic space and the orchestration of action within the filmic time have been so organized as to capture adequately the duality in the rhythm of African life (Gabriel, 1983). In *Emitai*, the film-maker has lined up a great deal of long shots to stress social cohesion and to define a community where space is anything but individual; as in traditional cosmology, land/space is emphasized at the expense of man, and the tempo of life is slow. In *Mandibi*, however, space is not constructed as social; the long shots of *Emitai* make way for close shots. Individuals are isolated and the tempo here approximates the rat-race of city life. Rapid camera movement, cross cutting, skilful manipulation of time, etc, that characterize Western cinema, are utilized.

Music, as an element of style, plays a cardinal role in the authentic African film, a role which should contrast with its role in Western cinema. Sembene distinguishes between the two:

> Whites have music for everything in their films to help you pay attention when you go to a film. They have music for rain when it is raining. It does not just rain; there is some music with the rain. When there is wind, it is not just windy, but there is some special type of music that goes along with the wind. They have music for tears and music for moments of emotion. They do not allow those elements to speak for themselves; they do not feel them. . . . In our films we can make the sensation of these elements felt without denaturing these visual elements, without broadcasting everything to the public (Yearwood, 1982:68).

Music in the film should be functional, not merely pleasing; it should be culturally denotative and constructive. Thus in *Ceddo*, the slave trade sequence is presented against the musical background of Black American gospel music. And this music sums up 'the historical circle of the slave trade: *I'll make it home someday*' (Martin, 1982:110).

Finally, where the Hollywood idiom calls for a 'closed and appeasing end,' the African idiom calls for an *open* end (Martin, 1982:85; Yearwood, 1982:89). Perhaps the best example is Soyinka's *Blues for a Prodigal*. As the guns boom and the military shoots its way (back?) into political power, the action freezes and instantly 'THE END?' (note the question mark) appears in large unsettling letters before the tail credits roll on. So, in such films, the ending 'is to encourage the

viewer to think about his life, his society and what necessary action must be taken to ameliorate these conditions' (Yearwood, 1982:86).

Conclusion

For the African film generally, as it is for the Nigerian film in particular, it is morning yet on creation day. The aesthetic is still being forged in the crucible of practice. In this teething period, there will be many theories, many divergent theories. The Senegalese film-maker, Paulin Vieyra, for instance, thinks that the African film should be better off in the vertical plane than in the horizontal plane favoured by the West:

> Wide screen . . . reflect European sensibility, hugging the earth, sticking fixedly to the ground, hemmed in by cloud and cold. The African perspective is naturally upward. It soars into the sky like the towering trees, giraffe-like craning for the height of the African skies. The sun draws the eye upward; traditional sculpture and art emphasize this perspective. So, Pauline Vieyra wants to put film into the vertical rather than the horizontal plane (Ralph-Bowman, 1983).

The point here is not that European perspective is earthbound. European dances (the ballet, in particular) like European architecture, soar *away* from the earth. The point is not that if it can be so characterized at all, the African perspective is really not upwards – like his dance forms, it reaches for and to the earth. The point is not that Pauline Vieyra's philosophical premise is questionable. The point for us is that the suitability of western cinematic forms for the African film is beginning to be *seriously* questioned.

It must be noted that the same issue featured prominently at the workshop on Film/T.V. organized by the Dag Hammarskjold Foundation. It was resolved, there, that:

> In some cultures, it is considered sincere and trustworthy when a person looks you straight in the face or, . . . looks you right in the eyes. In other cultures, it is rude and impertinent to 'catch somebody's eye' during conversation. In some cultures, people express themselves non-verbally by the mimicry of the face. In others, people talk with their body. . . . Such circumstances are of striking relevance to the film language in those cultures (Nwuneli, 1980:148).

A comprehensive African aesthetic of the film will be born of such questioning. The decolonization of the film, of course, goes beyond a truly indigenous aesthetic, however, comprehensive. If this aesthetic is not to be still born, the paradigms of power within the film industry must be controlled by the society that evolves the aesthetic. In other words, any viable aesthetic of the cinema is rooted in economic control over cinema technology and cinema institutions (Yearwood, 1982). Alongside evolving an indigenous aesthetic, a film culture should evolve a marketing structure capable of sustaining production capital

resources, otherwise that film culture will be marginalized by any film culture whose context of production defines the viewing experience of the audience.

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