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Africans filming Africa: questioning theories of an authentic African cinema

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ABSTRACT The question of ‘authenticity’ has been at the heart of much critical thinking about African cinema. During the colonial era, cinematic images of Africa effectively served to reinforce the Western vision of the ‘dark continent,’ viewing Africa as a wild and savage place, existing outside of history. When African filmmakers began to emerge in the 1960s and 1970s, they set out to counter these demeaning Western representations of their continent. However, although there was widespread agreement that colonial representations were distorted and ‘inauthentic,’ the definition of an ‘authentic’ African cinema has remained deeply problematic. What should an African film look like? How should it differ from Western cinema? This debate about the ‘authenticity’ of African cinema has not been limited to filmmakers. Both African and Western critics have readily applied themselves to the task of defining the nature of a truly African cinema. At the forefront of these debates are questions of cultural identity and critical subjectivity. Does the African critic understand African films in a way that is simply closed off to the Western critic? Is it possible for a Western critic to give a ‘true’ reading of an African film? This article will examine the notion of ‘authenticity’ in relation to a number of African films – Mambety’s Touki-Bouki (1973), Sembene’s Xala (1974) and Cissé’s Yeelen (1987) – examining the attitudes of both directors and critics. The article will also investigate the role of postcolonial theory in the analysis of not only African cinema, but contemporary African culture in general.

The cinema of sub-Saharan Africa began to emerge in the early 1960s, at the height of the process of decolonization. During the colonial era, cinematic images of Africa had been dominated by countless jungle epics, from the Tarzan series to The African Queen (1951) and the various adaptations of H. Rider Haggard’s deeply racist 1885 novel, King Solomon’s Mines. Effectively, Western cinematic representations of Africa helped to reinforce the dominant Hegelian vision of Africa as a continent with no history and no culture. Therefore, it came as no surprise that African filmmakers in the 1960s and

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* A modified version of this article was presented at a conference on ‘Postcolonial Cinema’ in Trinity College, Dublin (14-15 April 2000).

1 There have been three Hollywood versions of Haggard’s 1885 novel (1937, 1950, 1987), and there have been countless versions of the the Tarzan story from the 1920s to the 1980s. See Cameron (1994).

2 Anthropological films provide the other main source of cinematic representations of Africa. The problematic relationship between colonialism and the anthropological project in Africa (with many colonial administrators also working as anthropologists) has been well documented (Copans 1975). Anthropological films have been criticized for presenting an image of Africa as...
1970s set out to counter such demeaning and caricatural representations of Africa. At the second meeting of the federation of African filmmakers (FEPACI) in Algiers in 1975, this commitment to the development of an African cinema that would be radically different to previous cinematic representations of Africa was made explicit: not only should African films represent Africa from an African point of view, but they should also reject commercial, Western film codes. However, many African directors have retreated somewhat from such radical calls over the past two decades, worrying far more about the problems of forging a popular African cinema and creating a viable African film industry. The reality of ‘Africans filming Africa’ has not produced a unified, ‘authentic’ African cinema. Rather, it has produced a series of complex and often contradictory visions of the continent. Therefore, it is one of the aims of this article to examine the representation of Africa in a number of African films in order to explore the different assumptions and concerns that emerge from these works. The films to be discussed are Djibril Diop Mambety’s *Touki-Bouki* (Senegal, 1973), Ousmane Sembène’s *Xala* (Senegal, 1974), and Souleymane Cissé’s *Yeelen* (Mali, 1987), three radically different works with contrasting visions of Africa: *Touki-Bouki* is experimental and non-realistic; Sembène’s film is deeply political and satirical; and *Yeelen* employs a mythical structure to explore the role of knowledge and power in Bambara society.

The second aim of this article is closely linked to the first: namely, to address the critical reception of African films, focusing in particular on the Western critic’s relationship to African cinema. A great number of critics, both from Africa and the West, have argued, with differing degrees of subtlety and from varying standpoints, that the modern Western critic continues to be trapped within the Hegelian world-view that imagines Africa as a primitive and incomprehensible ‘other.’ I am in complete agreement with those who argue that the Western critic must be sensitive to differing cultural values when dealing with African culture. However, to follow theorists such as Christopher Miller in calling for critics to interpret African culture from ‘an authentically African point of view, interpreting African experience in African terms, perceiving rather than projecting’ is another matter entirely (Miller 1990: 1). In the course of this article, I will argue against all notions of ‘authenticity,’ whatever their philosophical or ideological basis: in my view, there is no ‘authentic’ Africa, nor is there an ‘authentic’ West. This article will also engage with the issues raised by postcolonial theory, examining their relevance to the interpretation not only of African cinema, but contemporary African culture generally.

As sub-Saharan Africa was one of the last regions in the world to produce its own cinematic images, it probably should come as no surprise that critics have applied themselves so readily to the manner in which a ‘true’ African cinema should differ from other cinemas. For some Western critics, the emergence of African cinema was the source of a grave disappointment. These critics did not know exactly what this cinema should be like, but they knew they wanted it to be radically different from everything that had come before. As the critic Serge Daney has claimed, a certain type of Western critic had been vaguely expecting African cinema to be a non-intellectual, all-singing, all-dancing extravaganza (Daney 1979). What room do such views leave for the films of Ousmane Sembene and Med Hondo which sought to produce a radical critique of

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3 The full text of the Algiers charter on African cinema is to be found in Bakari (1996: 27-30).
independent African societies? The articulate and socially committed cinema represented by these directors was simply too ‘Western’ for these critics.

However, there were just as many left-wing critics, both African and Western, who readily saw such radical African films as defining the ‘true’ African cinema.4 The mood of revolutionary optimism which accompanied the process of decolonization saw the birth of the theory of what was to become known as ‘Third Cinema,’ which was first developed in South America and which stressed the political function of cinema.5 Those critics who have advocated the theory of a ‘Third Cinema’ have stressed that ‘authentic’ Third World films must abandon the structures and thematic concerns of commercial Western cinema. This ideological imperative is clearly at the heart of Sembene’s work, and he has often stressed the need to move away from the preoccupations of Western cinema and, more particularly, from its stereotypical images of Africa. However, does this mean that Sembene’s work is ‘authentically’ African? If it is ‘authentically’ African, should we then consider the experimental and dreamlike films of Djibril Diop Mambety, which are primarily concerned with cultural issues, to be somehow less African? Or what of the mythical structure of Souleymane Cissé’s Yeelen?

Debates upon the nature of African cinema have too often been trapped within a reductive opposition between Western and African culture. This argument proposes that an ‘authentic’ African film must not only exclude all things European or Western, but must also set itself up in opposition to them. If we follow this argument to its logical conclusion, then all African films are ‘inauthentic’ or ‘Western’ simply because cinema was first invented in the West. However, if we remove this strict opposition between the West and the rest of the world, we get a much better view of the way in which different cultures interact with and influence one another. Cultural influence is not simply a one-way street with the West influencing the rest.6 Africa and the West are not mutually exclusive worlds that possess their own authentic and unchanging identities: they are hybrid entities that influence and modify each other, and this process of exchange applies to cinema (although in the current world order, the West remains the dominant force in this process of hybridization).

I would now like to look more closely at the three films under discussion, beginning with two Senegalese films: Sembene’s Xala and Mambety’s Touki-Bouki. These two films provide a very useful point of departure for this discussion, as they are both films that portray post-independence Senegalese society in the early 1970s. However, the two directors represent their country in radically different ways. Xala is a Marxist-inspired attack on the neocolonial state, and it has been hailed as a classic example of ‘Third Cinema.’ Touki-Bouki, on the other hand, is a complex and confusing meditation on

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5 For an example of Third Cinema theory, see Solanas and Getino (1971). The article was originally published in Spanish in 1969.

6 A fascinating example of the circulation of cultural influences can be found in the work of the late Japanese director, Akira Kurosawa. His early films were heavily influenced by American westerns. Then, as Kurosawa became an established figure in world cinema, his films in turn became models for American directors to copy. African cinema has not yet reached a prominent cultural position within the Western world (not even on the arthouse circuit) that would allow it to influence a generation of aspiring Western filmmakers. However, in other cultural spheres, African cultural influence is clearly visible. For example, African/black music is recognized as a major influence on the development of Western popular music since the 1950s.
culture, modernity and alienation, and it was immediately greeted by many critics as Africa’s first genuine avant-garde movie.

_Xala_ is essentially the satirical story of El Hadji Abdou Kader Bèye, a businessman who has just acceded to the Dakar Chamber of Commerce with his Senegalese colleagues, replacing their white French counterparts. On this very same day, El Hadji is to marry his third wife. As both a businessman and a respectable Muslim, El Hadji would appear to have reached the top of the social ladder. However, disaster strikes on his wedding night, when he is struck down with the _xala_, the curse of impotence. His impotence eventually leads him to financial ruin and personal humiliation at the hands of a group of beggars who turn out to be responsible for the curse. The political symbolism is plain to see: the neocolonial bourgeoisie are presented as an impotent class whose downfall will be brought about by the destitute and the oppressed of their society.

Such a militant approach was lauded by critics in the heyday of Third Cinema in the 1970s (Gabriel 1982: 77-86). However, in the sceptical 1980s and 1990s, post-structuralism, with its distrust of totalizing meta-narratives (and Marxism chief amongst them), had become the dominant critical credo. This has led to Sembene’s films being attacked by critics such as Olivier Barlet and Kenneth Harrow, who characterize them as being based on a series of simplistic oppositions: West versus Africa; urban versus rural, rich versus poor, etc.7 Harrow’s critique of Sembene’s film _Camp de Tíjaroye_ is a particularly pernicious example of such criticism (Harrow 1995). Sembene’s insistence on the oppressive nature of the French colonial regime in this film is interpreted by Harrow as an instance of the former’s adherence to the rules of Marxist reasoning, with its alleged dependence on simplistic, binary opposites. Harrow conveniently omits any references to the numerous scenes in which Sembene clearly shows that it is African soldiers who are guarding the camp in which the _tirailleurs sénégalais_ are imprisoned. Equally, citing what he sees as other cases of oppressor/victim relationships in Sembene’s work, Harrow neglects to mention the film _Émitai_, in which African colonial troops shoot unarmed African villagers.

Although Sembene’s work is highly political, with more than a touch of didacticism, I believe that Barlet and Harrow present a wildly inaccurate picture of his films. It is true that _Xala_ does not hide its socialist agenda, but it also presents an extremely complex vision of Senegalese society, addressing questions of gender as well as social, cultural, economic and political factors. The film is not a simplistic work of propaganda: it is deeply concerned with the rituals and symbols of Senegalese society, particularly those of the emerging urban bourgeoisie.

One of the most effective ways in which the film examines these issues is through the use of costume. In this respect, El Hadji’s third wife, Ngoné, is a particularly useful example. She is introduced to the spectator at the wedding reception, where she is wearing a Western-style wedding dress. As she arrives, the camera moves in for a close-up of the wedding cake, on top of which we see a plastic model of a white bride and groom. The incongruity of the whole wedding becomes apparent in this one image. Aspiring to Western middle-class standards involves copying the Western marriage down to the last detail, including the white wedding dress that has no place in either Islamic or African animistic practices.

Ngoné’s real value to El Hadji is shown in the scene where the matchmaker prepares the bride for the consummation of the marriage. This scene makes it clear that Ngoné is

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7 Throughout his book, Barlet (1996) continually refers to Sembene as a filmmaker who rejects the influence of the West in his films.
merely a sexual object that El Hadji has acquired. As the matchmaker undresses her and gives her advice on how to fulfil her ‘traditional’ duties as a wife, we see a nude photograph of Ngoné on the wall in the background. Shot in profile, showing Ngoné’s bare back and a glimpse of one of her breasts, the photograph acts as a sexual promise of what the marriage is supposed to bring to El Hadji. The eroticized Ngoné of the photograph is the one that he is marrying. As the matchmaker finishes speaking, Ngoné turns around and we see her bare breasts, which are mostly hidden in the ‘tasteful’ photograph. El Hadji is about to realize his wish: the image is about to take flesh (until the xala strikes, that is). This commodification of Ngoné is evident from the extravagances of the wedding reception and the presents which are lavished upon her as part of her dowry. Chief amongst these presents is the car. As El Hadji arrives at Ngoné’s house to consummate the marriage after he has been temporarily cured, he pauses to kiss the ribbon on the car. He believes that he will finally be able to enjoy his new possession but is once again left disappointed, as this time Ngoné is having her period. In Xala, money, sexual politics, Islamic culture and animism are all jumbled together in a complex mix of rituals and symbols. It is not Western influence that Sembene rejects (as Barlet and Harrow suggest) but Western capitalism.

As I have already argued, the reductive opposition between Africa and the West merely produces a sterile stand-off between the different cultural influences which are so clearly present in African films, and no more so than in Mambety’s work. Mambety borrows heavily from Western experimental films in Touki-Bouki, but in the process he creates something radically different, adapting such models to his own culture. In fact, Touki-Bouki can be read as an exploration of the cultural encounter between the West and Africa. The film tells the tale of a young Senegalese couple, Mory and Anta, who long to escape from their home town of Dakar to the promised land of France, where they hope to find the money that will allow them to return rich and famous to their homeland.

As we see in the opening sequence of the film, Mambety uses a complex array of imagery to reflect this contradictory pull between France and Africa. He deliberately plays around with the standard binary opposition between Africa and the West. In a static, medium-distance shot, we see a small boy riding on an ox’s back, slowly advancing across the open savannah towards the camera. On the soundtrack, we hear what seems to be a ‘traditional’ African tune, played on a wind instrument. The spectator is led to expect a tale of rural Africa, perhaps even a tale of a simple, African past. However, as boy and beast move into the foreground, the sound of an engine revving up begins to vie with and eventually to dominate the sound of the music. The image then cuts to a shot of Mory, the male hero of the story, riding along on his motorbike. Filmed from the position of a pillion passenger over Mory’s shoulder, the shot conveys a sense of speed and exhilaration far removed from the peace and calm of the preceding rural imagery. Time and location are fragmented as the spectator is shaken out of his/her original expectations and thrust into a tale of modern Africa, complete with motorbikes, motorways and machinery.

Despite the sudden intrusion of modern, technological artifacts, a visual link to the preceding rural scene remains in the shape of an ox’s skull attached to the front of Mory’s motorbike. In fact, the horns of the skull act as a sort of frame through which we observe the rapidly passing urban landscape. Essentially, Mambety provides us with a vision of an Africa in which the ‘modern,’ technological world is to be found side by side with the ‘traditional,’ rural world. As one of the characters in the film puts it, Mory is unsure whether he is driving an ox or a motorbike. He is the hybrid product of two vastly
different cultures. The meeting of Africa and the West has created a new reality, sometimes exciting and dynamic, sometimes menacing and destructive. In many ways, Mambety’s cinema itself stands as an example of the diversity and richness of this new culture, while also warning of its dangers.

Mambety rejects the openly political and social considerations of many African filmmakers of the 1970s, including Sembene. Indeed, in one highly significant scene early in the film, Mory is attacked by a group of young, left-wing intellectuals who despise him for his apolitical, amoral lifestyle. This scene can be read as Mambety thumbing his nose at those who would have him present a political agenda in his films. Equally, the figure of the postman who wanders aimlessly through the film appears to be a sideswipe at the figure of the postman in Sembene’s film Mandabi, who is portrayed as someone who ‘delivers’ hope in the form of the film’s political message of social solidarity. These anti-political elements do not mean that Mambety’s films are not political, simply that he sees the world primarily in terms of culture rather than politics.

For the Western spectator, the narratives of Xala and Touki-Bouki reveal certain recognizable elements. Xala works broadly within a social realist framework, using a number of Brechtian symbolic devices. One can also readily identify the influence of a number of experimental Western movies on Touki-Bouki: firstly, one could mention Easy Rider and its psychedelic tale of the adventures of two drug-fuelled bikers; we might also think of Nicholas Roeg’s films, especially Performance, and their blurring of identity, location, gender and time.

A number of African critics have reacted angrily to the cataloguing of Western influences in African cinema. In fact, many critics have convincingly argued that African cinema has borrowed heavily from the oral tradition (Barlet 1996: 157-99; Diawara 1996: 209-18). For example, both Xala and Touki-Bouki reproduce elements of traditional ‘trickster’ tales. The archetypal ‘trickster’ narratives are those concerning Leuk-le-lièvre, the African forefather of the ‘Brer Rabbit’ character in the tales of the American South. Indeed, the title Touki-Bouki, which means ‘the hyena’s voyage,’ evokes another staple character of the ‘trickster’ tale, the hyena; in West African folk tradition, the hyena, regarded as a cunning, deceitful animal that cannot be trusted, plays the role often attributed to the fox in the West. As in these traditional ‘trickster’ tales, the protagonists in both films are set a number of challenges with a prize waiting at the end. In Touki-Bouki, Mory and Anta deceive a number of hapless victims only to see the prize of their glorious journey to France ruined by Mory’s last-minute change of heart. In Xala, El Hadji becomes the hapless victim, rather than the perpetrator, of deceit and cunning as he is set a number of tasks to overcome his impotence. A man who has callously deceived people in the past, El Hadji is forced to meet the fate that he has doled out to others.

However, the exploration of cinematic links to orality often overlooks the fact that African cinema, while providing a certain continuity with elements of the oral tradition, also constitutes a major rupture with that tradition. Cinema literally introduces a different way of seeing and representing the world to the stories of the griot, the guardian of the spoken word in Africa: a film, with its particular emphasis on spatial and temporal representation, introduces radically different questions to the oral performances of a griot. The oral tradition informs the work of African directors such as Sembene, Mambety and Cissé, but it cannot be cited as the sole determining factor in the

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8 For a discussion of orality in relation to Sembene’s work, including analysis of ‘trickster’ narratives, see Cham (1982).
production of African cinematic representations. If elements of orality are used in African films, they must be adapted to the expressive potential of the cinema as a medium. Equally, it is wrong to assume that African cinema audiences can only understand films that work within the structures of their own oral tradition. For generations now, Africans have been viewing Kung Fu movies and Indian melodramas, although they often respond to these films as though attending an oral performance (jumping up and down, clapping, imitating the actors). The relationship between the paying cinema spectator and a film, and the relationship between listener and storyteller, are vastly different. For example, films cannot engage in a dialogue with members of the audience as happens in a traditional oral performance. Above all, it should not be forgotten that films are commercial enterprises. One must pay to enter the cinema: it is not a ‘traditional’ communal gathering.

The examination of the final film under discussion here, Yeelen (1987), made by the Malian director, Souleymane Cissé, will focus on critical reactions rather than detailed analysis of the film itself. Cissé had begun his career with social realist films in the mode of Sembene, but Yeelen marked a major departure with its exploration of mythology and the supernatural in a rural African society. The first African film to win a prize at the Cannes Film Festival, and also a popular success in Europe, it has been the focus of intense critical debate. Some critics see Yeelen as the first genuine example of a truly African film both in terms of its style and content, while others have denounced it for reproducing the anthropological gaze and pandering to exotic Western stereotypes of Africa. However, critics have managed to agree on one point at least: namely, that the film is very complex, and deeply embedded in the culture of the Bambara people of the Western Sudan, particularly the rituals of the secret society of the Komo.

The film takes place at an unspecified moment in the precolonial era, and it tells the story of Nianankoro, son of one of the elders of the Komo. Nianankoro, an adept of the society, is impatient at having to wait to learn the secrets of the Komo, so he steals one of the sacred fetishes and flees his homeland. However, he is eventually tracked down by his father, and in the film’s final showdown, both father and son are killed. Despite the mythical trappings of the story, Cissé has consistently argued that Yeelen is, in fact, his most politicized work, and not simply an escape into a glorified African past. Far from pandering to the exotic fantasies of the West, the film attempts to explore a ‘modernist’ vision of Bambara culture, which stresses the power of so-called traditional cultures to modify and develop rather than act as endless repetitions of themselves.

The film criticizes the abuse of power and knowledge by the elders of the Komo, and it presents the ultimate act of transgression in revealing their supernatural power both to Nianankoro and to the cinema spectator. Much has been written about Cissé’s meticulous recreation of the rituals of the Komo, particularly in the long scene in which we see the elders of the Komo venting their anger against Nianankoro. However, is it absolutely necessary to understand the intricacies of the Komo in order to understand the film’s discussion of the wresting of power and knowledge from what is presented as an oppressive and corrupt elite? Certain African critics have lambasted their Western

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9 Manthia Diawara praises Yeelen for creating an African cinema which ‘obeys the mise-en-scène of the oral tradition’ (Diawara 1992: 164). Nwachukwu Frank Ukadike also praises the film’s inventiveness in imitating the structures of orality, but he is wary of the film’s ‘universalism,’ which is seen to be the result of the targetting of ‘foreign’ (i.e. Western) audiences (Ukadike 1994: 254-62).

10 For example, see Philip Gentile’s examination of the film’s depiction of the rituals of the Komo (Gentile 1995).
counterparts for their ‘misreadings’ of Yeelen, which they see as the result of their ignorance of Bambara culture. It is indeed salutary that Western critics, with our tendency to universalize our own experience, should be reminded of the cultural specificity of African cultural artefacts. However, speaking as a Western critic, I feel that I am in good company in not understanding the full complexities of the Komo. For a start, Africans other than Bambaras might be a bit nonplussed at certain points in the film. In fact, even Bambaras cannot be expected to understand all of the film’s many-layered symbols, for the simple reason that only a select few are supposed to know all seven levels of the Komo. In this context, one simply cannot posit an accurate and ‘authentic’ African interpretation of the film against which one can oppose a simplistic, Western version. In fact, the film provides sufficient information within its narrative structure for viewers to comprehend the most important elements of the story. For example, in the scene featuring the rituals of the Komo, the anger of the elders and their fear at the potential loss of their privileged position is clear to the average, film-literate spectator. The film may imitate the complex structures of Bambara mythology, but its cinematic narrative retains more than enough ‘legibility’ as a film for the uninitiated cinema spectator to interpret the basic story.

It is not my purpose here to encourage ‘universalist’ readings of African films. On the contrary, I am in favour of using a cultural materialist framework that attempts to situate a film within its specific cultural context, and Western critics should indeed investigate the structures of Bambara society when examining Yeelen. However, I feel it is vital to reject the notion that only Africans can ‘accurately’ interpret African texts. The assumption on the part of Christopher Miller (quoted at the beginning of this article), that there is an authentic African point of view to which the Western critic should vainly aspire, is vitally flawed. While one cannot but accept that an African critic may very well have a different set of assumptions from the Western critic, there is absolutely no means of establishing the existence of a single, unified African view on African issues. The Western critic will always display some degree of ‘ethnocentrism,’ and this must be taken into account when appraising his/her work, but it should in no way be used to disqualify such work. In fact, as Mikhail Bakhtin has argued, an outsider’s view of a culture can be deeply enriching for both parties:

*Creative understanding* does not renounce itself, its own place and time, its own culture; and it forgets nothing. In order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be located outside the object of his/her creative understanding – in time, in space, in culture. In the realm of culture, outsideness is a most powerful factor in understanding … We raise new questions for a foreign culture, ones that it did not raise for itself; we seek answers to our own questions in it; and the foreign culture responds to us by revealing to us its new aspects and new semantic depths. Without one’s own questions one cannot creatively understand anything other or foreign (quoted in Willemen 1989: 26).

Attempts to understand ‘others’ must be accompanied by a recognition of our own cultural specificity.

Each of the three films discussed in this article presents a different cinematic and ideological vision of Africa. Therefore, what conclusions can we draw about the category of ‘African cinema’? The filmmaker and critic James Potts has noted the tendency within Africa and the West to make sweeping generalizations about the nature of ‘black’ or ‘African cinema.’ Not only do such arguments neglect the vast cultural diversity of the African continent, but they also assume that it is possible to create radically different film

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11 For instance, see the scathing comments made by Nixon K. Kariithi about Western ‘misreadings’ of Yeelen and other African films (Kariithi 1995).
languages.’ Having worked as a technical adviser on film projects in Ethiopia and Kenya over a five-year period, Potts was able to experience the problems of filmmaking in Africa first-hand. This leads him to argue that the technical limitations within which African filmmakers are forced to work can be shown to impose an aesthetic on a film far more readily than do the director’s ethnic origins. Essentially, Potts believes that we do not yet have the theoretical basis to talk about national or ethnic film styles. Instead, he proposes an approach that attempts to negotiate the relationship between the ‘universal’ and the ‘local’ aspects of filmmaking:

I still prefer to think that film-making is a form of universal speech – not so much a ‘Visual Esperanto’ as a developing visual language with a rich variety of dialects and idiolects which contain both alien and indigenous elements. These elements must be studied more closely and made more explicit if genuine intercultural communication is to take place (Potts 1979: 81).

I believe that this approach allows us to develop a more complex vision of African cinema, viewing it in terms of its ability to adapt and modify established film codes from around the world. Therefore, the category of African cinema should be used descriptively rather than prescriptively: one cannot force the cinema of an entire continent to adhere to some preordained programme.

This is even more true when one attempts to create intercontinental categories: for example, as was argued above, most theorists of ‘Third Cinema’ sought to characterize the cinematic production of the entire Third World, not just Africa, as revolutionary and fundamentally opposed to Western hegemony, both in terms of style and content, a characterization that simply did not reflect reality (and which also grossly over-simplified the nature of ‘Western’ cinema). I believe that the category of the post-colonial offers a better framework within which to examine the cinematic production of those countries that were formerly colonies of the Western imperial powers. As with all categories and schools, critics are not in complete agreement as to the definition of ‘post-colonialism.’ In fact, one cannot speak of post-colonialism as a single entity, as it comprises critics working from vastly different critical perspectives, from Marxists to feminists to post-structuralists. Essentially, post-colonialism applies these different approaches in an exploration of the links between cultures that have experienced colonization by one of the Western powers. However, as many critics have pointed out, post-colonialism runs the danger of viewing a nation’s entire history through the prism of the colonial encounter, tying the former colonizer and the former colonized together in a permanent if reluctant embrace.

This has led a number of critics to reject post-colonial theory, claiming that it is distinctly Eurocentric in its approach, precisely because of its privileging of the colonial era. Aijaz Ahmad argues this case in the following quotation:

In periodizing our history in the triadic terms of precolonial, colonial and postcolonial, the conceptual apparatus of ‘postcolonial criticism’ privileges as primary the role of colonialism as the principle of structuration in that history, so that all that came before colonialism becomes its own prehistory and whatever comes after can only be lived as infinite aftermath. That may well be how it appears to those who look at that history from the outside – to those, in other words, who look at the former colonies in Asia and Africa from inside the advanced capitalist countries – but not to those who live inside that history (Ahmad 1996: 280-81; my italics).

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12 In his excellent introduction to Questions of Third Cinema, Paul Willemen expresses similar doubts about the homogenous and over-simplified picture of Third World Cinema that was emerging from the work of critics such as Teshome Gabriel (Willemen 1989: 15-17).
Essentially, Ahmad accuses ‘postcolonial theory’ of maintaining the colonial paradigm in which Africa (and Asia) are viewed as the object of Western actions rather than as active participants in the making of their own history. As a Marxist, Ahmad believes that it is the fact of ‘capitalist modernity’ and its implications for African and Asian societies that links their literatures and cultures together. While recognizing the value and power of ‘postcolonialism’ as a category, he rightly warns that when applied too loosely it becomes mere jargon.

However, it is a gross simplification to say that all post-colonial theory is merely obsessed with the relationship between Africa and its former colonial masters. In fact, post-colonial theory has been greatly effective in forging links across the ‘peripheral,’ formerly colonized world, bypassing the ‘centres’ of Western power altogether. This forging of links along the periphery highlights the structures of power in the modern world.13 Such a move is particularly welcome in African cultural studies: it is all too common for African films and novels from different ends of the continent to be thrown together on the basis that they express some form of common, authentic African identity. In contrast, post-colonialism explores links between African cultures in the light of their shared history of colonial exploitation and their rebellion against this oppression (without assuming that this shared experience is identical in every African state). The three African films discussed in this article could all be fruitfully analysed within a post-colonial critical framework that seeks to explore cultural and political forces in a world that remains dominated by Western capital: the examination of neo-colonial Africa in Xala and Touki-Bouki is plain to see, but Yeelen, with its desire to present an African vision of modernity, can equally be argued to be challenging Western perceptions of knowledge in Africa. As Homi K. Bhabha has argued: ‘Postcolonial criticism bears witness to the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world order’ (Bhabha 1994: 171). I believe that this fact alone makes the post-colonial an extremely useful and strategic critical term in the analysis of contemporary African culture.

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13 The conference at which this article was first presented brought together critics working on cinema from different parts of the world (Africa, Asia, Australia, New Zealand and the Caribbean). Remaining attentive to cultural specificities, speakers also sought to explore common ideas in each of these cinemas: the problematic relationship with the former colonizer, questioning of ‘national’ and ‘ethnic’ identities, the ‘post-national’ cinema of recent years with its focus on individual rather than group identity.


