African Film: New Forms of Aesthetics and Politics.

Prestel, 2010, 319 p., bibl., filmo., DVD

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DIAWARA, Manthia — *African Film: New Forms of Aesthetics and Politics*. Prestel, 2010, 319 p., bibl., filmo., DVD

- 1 *African Film* is mostly set in Ouagadougou, Berlin and Nollywood. Extended by Visions of a New African Cinema and Filmographies, the book is visually cinematic. Its layout displays a spectacular use of color, form and space. Preceding the forward, seven photographic pages from different films preview its content.
- 2 Ouagadougou narrates an unsavory trip from New York to Ouagadougou; Diawara also depicts the ambiance during the Fespaco, which Sembène iconoclastically described as a “zoo where people came to see a rare animal called the African filmmaker” (p. 21). Memories of the “demigod of African Cinema” permeate the narrative (p. 20). Sembène’s deliberate marketing of his image as embodying the working class and the rationale for his self-promotion, namely African authenticity and anti-Senghorian assimilation, are underscored. This portrait sketches his style and stresses spatial polarization, class struggles, the mythic creation of an African image and resistance. “Sembène’s key contributions to world cinema reside in his putting value in the African image and giving it voice”, Diawara argues (p. 23). Change and progressivism pervade his films. The author notes the reasons for the voice-overs in Borom Sarret (1963); his perusal of the opening scene of *La Noire de...* (1966) highlights its treatment of stereotypes and illusions. Interestingly, Diawara values Sembène’s filmic “mistakes” as “salutary for the construction of the African self-image in film” (p. 29). These “mistakes” attributed to “imperfect cinema” are disclosed. Ultimately, his films dramatize an aesthetics of (re)writing addressing Western misrepresentations of the African and Africa. Consequentially, Diawara stresses Sembène’s opposition to

francophonie as an “Africaphone” devoted to African languages. He revisits the “Nesle syndrome” characterizing the French production of African films, which caters to European audiences by dictating an exotic representation of Africa. In another vein, Diawara evokes the “close-ups” and images in *Mandabi* to buttress Sembène’s stance on language, his linear focus on the “quotidian in a traditional setting” (p. 38), and his technique of “pairing” images and scenes, which creates a “natural and original state of film spectatorship” (p. 39). Thus, Diawara dispels readings of *Mandabi* as a comedy; rather, it is a “critique of francophonie and neo-colonialism”, a “political tragedy” (p. 41) challenging linguistic universalism (p. 42).

- 3 Sembène’s comparative style is exemplified by *Mandabi*, which contrasts Wolof and French as representing belonging and oppression. Moreover, Diawara assesses the post-Sembène era and specifies his preference of a content determining the form. He unveils the linearity of Sembène’s narrative, which relies on flashbacks and flashforwards in representing spatial oppositions, the themes of return “home” and transformation in Borom Sarret, *La Noire de...*, etc. Diawara confirms the preeminence of themes in his scenarios. Souleymane Cissé and Djibril Diop Mambéty are subsequently discussed as his opposites because they put form over content. The dichotomous paradigm “content of the form” vs “form of the content” dominates this discussion (p. 49). Diawara eventually stresses the reason for Sembène’s outshining of Mambéty, whose cinematic practice is almost unfairly presented as reacting to Sembène. Some parallels are drawn between S. Pierre Yaméogo’s *Moi et mon blanc* (2003) and *Mandabi* in one of Diawara’s accounts of life in Ouagadougou.
- 4 Diawara shifts his focus and presents Burkinabe films as representing the perturbation of a paradise-like social order through incest and witchcraft along with its subsequent consequences (expulsion and renewal). The aforementioned paradigm resurfaces through Delwende’s “privileging of content over form” (p. 58) unlike Tilai and Wend Kuuni, which translate the opposite model. However, this latest analysis narrows the broader scope of Burkinabe cinema because it only addresses these films. Ultimately, Diawara’s preference for Delwende is warranted by Yaméogo’s similarities with Sembène. Its extensive study is quite revealing in this respect. Diawara may be promoting Yaméogo in the post-Sembène period given his notable preference of content over form. Not to be outdone, Haile Gerima’s celebrated comeback to Fespaco through his film *Teza* features the “content of the form” associated with Sembène. Diawara concludes Ouagadougou with a compelling argument for the need to protect Fespaco “from the predators of African cinema” while deriding the paternalist “Cinéma Haute Couture” (p. 70).
- 5 The second chapter notes Europe’s renewed interest in African cinema, and the film event hosted by the Haus der Kulturen der Welt of Berlin attests to it. As its film curator, Diawara emphasizes the positive particularities of African cinema against “Euro-liberal, humanist and stereotypical representations of Africa” during this event (p. 74). Didacticism is among these particularities; the film *Cloud over Conakry* highlights this fact. The event enables him to plead against the humanitarian “Tarzanism” (p. 76) characterizing Western NGOs, journalism, financial institutions and Hollywood representations of Africa in films he studies accordingly. “Humanitarian Tarzanism” empowers the West as the savior while infantilizing the rescued/victimized Africans. Interestingly, his assessment of “Tarzanism” calls for the establishment of

“cultural centers” in the West to educate Westerners about the reasons for Africa’s current problems (p. 81).

- 6 Parts of *African Film* tackle paternalistic views of African cinema and its evolution. The perception of this cinema occurs in a context of filmic production opposing European film festivals and the Hollywood film industry, Diawara notes. With such differences, African films gain respect as deconstructionists of the Hollywood film aesthetics for European audiences and World cinema. Diawara underlines the correlation between this European appreciation of African cinema and the alienation of African filmmakers from “their African base of form and aesthetics” (p. 87).
- 7 The second chapter progresses into the world of art at the Haus. Here, Diawara dwells on the new wave of post-Sembèlian African filmmakers’s engagement; these, he argues, are now drawn to world cinemas as they effect a renewal by “consider[ing] the best both in Sembène’s and contemporary world cinemas” (p. 95). The critic nuances the harsh criticism of “calabash cinema” against this generation affiliated with the new African film wave by describing how they enrich African cinema. He thus notes the “multiplicity of voices and cinematic styles” as a major difference in this cinema that challenges the “desire for a unity of voices around the ideology of [...] (FEPACI)” (p. 97). Diawara deconstructs the works of the new filmmakers championing this multiplicity; he critically innovates by placing each one of them in these three “strands”: an “Arte wave” led by Aberrahmane Sissako once produced by Pierre Chevalier, “the Guild of African Filmmakers and a narrative brand” (p. 98). He strikingly suggests that the particularity of this new wave is its primary focus on cinema as an art not ideology.
- 8 Reflections on Sembène’s differences and/or resemblance with Ouédraogo or Souleymane Cissé’s lead to the introduction of these strands, starting with the Arte wave. Diawara’s exegesis of the New African film wave exposes their filmic practices. His review of Sissako’s leading films highlights their fundamental characteristics: poetry, *mise en scène*, time and space through long and close-up shots along with the theme of emigration. Diawara revisits his comparative style of analysis in explaining the reasons for situating Katy Lena Ndiaye and Mahamat-Saleh Haroun in this new wave. The reader may be surprised to encounter intermittent discussions of Jean-Luc Godard’s *Tout va bien* and his film conception; however, the critic relates them significantly to the African new wave. His original reading of Sissako’s *Bamako*, an opposite of a “nostalgic cinema” mirroring “imperfect” cinema, provides ample proof of it. Here, Diawara uses a subversive language, as he unveils the uniqueness of Sissako’s film and its intertextuality with Sembène’s cinema practice. Yet, the critic dwells so much on *Bamako* that the other actors of the new wave become invisible. However, the significance of this film for Africa and its cinema may warrant such accentuation.
- 9 Diawara makes the following optimistic argument about La Guilde: “the hope of a new political film language lies in Africa” (p. 120). This statement is articulated in reference to La Guilde Africaine des Réalisateurs et Producteurs. He underlines this movement’s involvement in advancing African and African Diaspora cinemas. Jean-Pierre Bekolo’s leading creative role is celebrated accordingly. The theme and aesthetics of his film *Le complot d’Aristote* are underscored as well as the Greek philosopher’s supposed role in the alienation of young African cinéphiles by Western cinema. Unusual solutions to this ideological trapping are offered, nonetheless. Diawara’s discussion of *Le complot* produces insights on Bekolo’s film conception; it

proposes a diagnosis of African spectators and Hollywood action films in the same vein. The dilemma facing the African filmmaker is identified; so are Bekolo and Bakupa-Kanyinda's main filmic goals: "the deconstruction of plot" and a rehabilitation of the "lost stories of the African experience in modernity" (p. 125). Bakupa-Kanyinda's docudrama *Le Damier* (1996) is critiqued appropriately in this respect. The focus on the Guild also consecrates Jihan el-Tahri's commitment to historical and political truth through her investigative documentary and film. Ultimately, the members of the African Guild transcend the polarization Sembène/Mambéty by making a cinema of "politics as well as poetics" (p. 129) open to the diaspora of filmmakers and films such as Akomafrah' and his *Handsworth Songs* (1986). Bakupa-Kanyinda's *Juju Factory* is celebrated in this context as a filmic intertext that ushers in a "psychotherapy" (p. 134) and a new form of characterization built on "Character neurosis" (pp. 135-136).

- 10 The opening of the section *The New Popular African Cinema* identifies the advent of two strands since Sembène's *Black Girl* (1966): "an experimental and art et essai" strand and a "populist strand" (p. 138). An extensive chronicling of African cinema follows with a mention of Western, melodramatic and comic films and their directors' specific targeting of African audiences. Diawara reveals here the way the New African Cinema Wave uses "old things" in order to "appeal to the emotions of spectators with new ways" (p. 143). Beyond advocating the "popular" strand of this cinema, the author explains what makes it so. He notes subsequently the birth of a Senegalese nationalist cinema grounded in popular culture and informed by Senghorian aesthetics. Diawara refers to specific films and filmmakers, dubbed "Senghorian directors" and opposed to Sembène in this regard (p. 150). Central to Senghor's definition of art, the word rhythm pervades this analysis. Indeed, Diawara's study of populist and nationalist cinema veers into a reassessment of Senghor's philosophy, and the question of identification is framed appropriately. The modern nation also sustains populism in the African New Wave Cinema. Here and elsewhere, the transition occurs through a study of films (*Finyé* and *Clouds Over Conakry*) exemplifying a popular cinema that celebrates the nation against aberrant traditions/fanaticism.
- 11 Diawara's formal analysis ends with Nollywood. As a panel discussion, the addendum engages him with two Anglophone African filmmakers who chronicle their involvement in cinema. Diawara incorporates rich biographies of specific African filmmakers and their films in *Filmographies*. Nollywood opens in a comical and alarming note about Nigerian videos and traveling in Africa. The trip motif foregrounds Diawara's account of the plot components of the popular Nollywood movies. The distinction between Nollywood and Yoruba videos along with their characteristics is striking. Terms such as "narrative predictability", "fantasies", "narrative desires", etc. characterized the relationship between Nollywood films and their spectators. Diawara ultimately studies the narratological elements, the complexities of the different genres and themes associated with Nollywood as well as the prevalence of remakes in this video industry and its impact on the African social imaginary. A "physical and psychological mobility" essentially characterizes these films, Diawara argues further (p. 179). He makes specific references to such important Nollywood films as the classic *Living in Bondage* in this vein. These tease out what the "Christian strand" (p. 182) and the "Ikemefuna genre" (p. 181). Needless to say, Nollywood's flaws are duly noted, as Diawara highlights the particularities of the technicality of filming in this consumerist visual industry. Diawara also dwells on its

qualities and African essence. Here again, he makes a provocative albeit insightful reading of Nollywood in light of Senghor's aesthetics.

- 12 In fine, *African Film* combines critical analysis and cinematography in revealing the evolution of African cinema, with its various currents and practitioners. It consecrates an African cinema reflecting a process of "filming back" echoing *The Empire Writes Back*. Exhibiting a diverse range of African filmmakers, the book is a precious reference guide for African cinema with its enclosed DVD.