

TEACHING THIRD WORLD CINEMA

TESHOME H GABRIEL TAKES A CRITICAL LOOK AT CULTURAL EXCHANGE IN THE WESTERN CLASSROOM

[In this study I provide examples from African films to demonstrate the three major components of a course in Third World cinema at the University of California, Los Angeles. These are: the clarification of the grammar of African film; the exploration of the production milieu of African film; and the need for a critical construct of African film culture.]

Introduction

When the meaning of a film is inaccessible because the belief systems, ideologies, cultural references or styles of filmic execution are foreign to the viewer, the effect is that of a 'cultural curtain'. 'Reading' a film from a geographical and cultural distance may be problematised by several factors. The most serious example is the tendency of an audience to read a film by automatically incorporating it within the methodologies and critical matrices which are already familiar to the audience. This approach is much in evidence in the Western world where sophisticated critical and theoretical categories domesticate whatever is alien to its own cultural tradition. The domestication process may enrich Western aesthetics and cultural traditions, but while doing so it necessarily misrepresents and eventually subverts other cultural traditions. Because students in the West are not getting enough general knowledge about other cultures in school or even at university, there is a lack of cultural perspective and intercultural understanding.

In a course of study which focuses on Third World films, there is perhaps much to be gained

in attending to the Theory of Translation.¹ In translation theory there are two distinct approaches: the first aims towards a 'target text' where the effort is to translate it point-for-point into terms of Western cognition. In such translation the terms of the original culture are lost. In the second approach, the more important for the present purpose, the quest is for a deeper understanding of the 'source text', for meaning as contexted in its own terms. The pedagogical issue for a teacher of Third World films is to insure against the students assuming that the features of a Third World film always 'correspond' to something familiar in America or Europe.

Text and Context

Students in a Third World film class must be brought to realise that not only are surface meanings in Third World films replete with unfamiliar cultural clues as to point of view and socio-political and ideological complexities, but also that there is a deeper level of meaning which cannot be intuited by the uninformed viewer. The first stage of teaching, then, advances the notion that text and context of Third World cinema both need careful scrutiny.

For instance, in Western media liquor is often poured liberally into a glass; consider the

¹ Gideon Toury, 'Translated Literature: System, Norm, Performance', *Poetics Today* (special issue on 'Theory of Translation and Intercultural Relations') Summer/Autumn 1981, vol 2 no 4, pp 9-27.

number of times this happens in a single episode of the US television soap opera, *General Hospital*, for an indication of the pervasiveness of this symbol in Western visual media. What does a lavish splashing of spirits signify to the Western audience? If not the wealth of the pourer, it is the power to drink without censure in the middle of the day, or whenever an unpleasant event occurs. These received impressions will not carry the Westerner far in viewing African or Middle Eastern films, however. For instance, in a Moroccan film directed by Souhel Ben Baraka, *A Thousand and One Hands* (1972), the blonde wife of the Moroccan rug businessman, Jamal, at one point pours whiskey into a glass. In Morocco, as well as in other Middle Eastern countries where Islam is the principal religion, alcohol is prohibited by Islamic law. The white woman's action, and Jamal's acquiescence to her offer, characterises the couple as sacrilegious and godless. The unwary student has missed a key signal of the film's meaning if the scene is analysed with only the Westerner's stock of cultural references.

Understanding a Third World film involves not only such symbols, it also extends to the very subject matter of films and to the treatment of characters. For example, in the Ethiopian film *Gouma* (1973), directed by Greek-Ethiopian Michael Papatakis, a murderer completes his penitential sentence to wander, enchained and begging, until he has made payment for his *gouma*, blood guilt. Such a custom is unknown in the West; consequently no such theme could have engendered a movie in the West. The question of 'honour' or contrition, as opposed to vengeance by the family of the deceased, is prevalent in African folkloric cinema; yet it has such a foreignness to it that non-Third World viewers will find it hard to penetrate. Another characterisation that receives an altogether different treatment in Third World films is the depiction of a blind person. In Western films, the blind may be regarded as victims of misfortune; but in such African films as *Gouma* or *Xala* (directed by the Senegalese film-maker Ousmane Sembene, 1974) the blind person is presented as a seer with foresight and foreknowledge and functions as the decoding device to unravel not only the true meaning but also the ultimate resolution of the film.

The most 'simple' and pervasive icons may

have radically different meanings outside their own milieu. In Western culture, for instance, the blue-eyed blonde signifies 'beauty', whereas in the Moroccan film, *A Thousand and One Hands*, in the Mauretanian film, *Soleil O* (directed by Med Hondo, 1969) or the Senegalese film, *The Black Prince of St. Germain* (directed by Ben Diogaye Beye, 1974), she (or it) stands as a symbol of the destructiveness of Europe or cultural imperialism. Also, 'white' in Western culture is a colour which stands as a sign for 'purity' or 'innocence'. In the Ethiopian film, *Harvest: 3000 Years* (directed by Haile Gerima, 1975), however, a peasant girl's dream about the landlord's imminent death is recounted to her grandmother, prompting a question about the colour of his attire, which was 'pure white', the cultural symbol of death. 'And what did your father wear?' asks the grandmother, to which the girl responds, 'the same worn-out dress he always wears', a reference to life. For the funeral procession in *A Thousand and One Hands*, where all the mourners are dressed in white, the cross-cultural translation will be identical to dark dress worn by mourners in the West. Here is a case where the signifier, dependent on oppositions, reverses the order of signification.

Geographical or cultural distance may render a film text unpalatable to a Western audience, though this effect may arise also from the audience's limitations of consciousness, its prejudices or strongly held beliefs. For instance, in *Ceddo* (directed by Sembene, 1977), Moslem imperialism is condemned for its role in the breakdown of traditional African spirituality: devout followers of Islam may consequently find the film difficult. Similarly, *Soleil O* depicts the African adoption of Christianity by turning the symbol of a cross into a sword, representing the ideology of the 'white man's burden' – founded as it is on the Christian ethos – as a violent intrusion into the peaceful and communal African social fabric.

Ethnocentric readings may transform a minor incident in a narrative into a major one. For instance, the ritual context of animal slaughter in African films immediately raises the question of cruelty to animals: what Western students perceive as brutal acts may be perfectly normal in the African context. In many rural societies, slaughtering animals for food is recognised as a fact of life, whereas for Westerners whose only

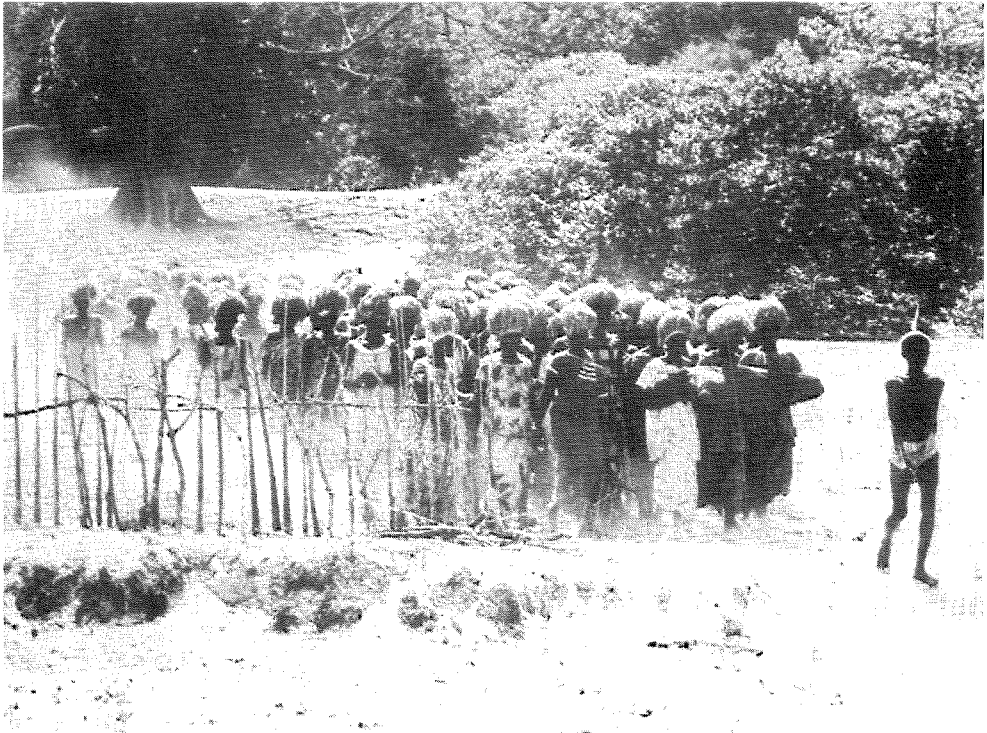
contact with meat involves the plastic wrapped supermarket package, such carnage may appear gratuitous. More importantly, American students, taught since childhood that their worth is defined in terms of individual achievement and responsibility, may find representations of the close-knit structure of the African family, involving responsibility for the community, simply bewildering.

A course on Third World cinema must provide a wide range of examples, so that students have the opportunity to develop a sense not only of the plurality of cultures and societies but also of their distinctiveness and worth. What is aimed for is a widening of students' perspectives on artistic representation and on an understanding of the source texts on their own terms and within their own cultural patterns.

In making a film rooted in Third World cultures, the film-maker's choice is circumscribed both culturally and ideologically. Thematic as well as stylistic features of such films have been characterised as 'primitive',

reminiscent of early cinema. This kind of judgement is generally based on technological criteria of cultural worth and an assumed trajectory of the evolution of film language from the 'primitive' to the 'civilised'.

To the uninitiated eye, for instance, *Emitai* (directed by Sembene, 1972) appears devoid of elementary cinematic pacing and a basic variety of shots. Here the close-up is avoided and narrative time seems to approximate real time. Yet in *Mandabi* (1968), shot three years earlier, Sembene's mastery of the technique of the conventions of close-up is quite evident. Each film uses cinematic conventions that correspond to its own thematic orientation. *Emitai* is set in rural Africa of the colonial period; *Mandabi*, shot in post-independence, urban Africa, uses a quicker pace as well as tight close-ups. The use of tight close-action shots in *Emitai*, however, would have destroyed the film's social/collective percepts: isolating individuals would have jarred the social unity and collective purpose the film was attempting to stress.



Emitai: social unity and collective purpose represented in long shot.

The long takes and leisurely rhythm evident in many African films may be read as conveying an approximation of time as perceived by rural people, for whom land is both a means of livelihood and the source of a strong sense of identity. The Angolan films *Pathway to the Stars* (1980) and *Conceição Tchiambula (A Day in a Life)*, 1981, both directed by Antonio Ole, as well as the Ethiopian *Harvest: 3000 Years*, characteristically use long shots of a man or woman walking across a landscape. The small scale of human figures in relation to the background, a general feature of African pictorial representation, suggests the traditional cosmology, in which the individual is dwarfed by the land.

The Western student, situated within a particular film culture, brings to film viewing a codified set of perceptions and interpretive methods. For this audience, long and/or group shots may be thought of as merely delineations of narrative space: for the Third World viewer with a strong sense of identification with land and community, the long shot and long take of the land and group scenes may in fact function in the same way as a close-shot does for a Western spectator. Most student viewers, for instance, find the pilgrimage scene in *A Thousand and One Hands* extremely boring, yet for the Moroccan, it can operate as a powerful representation of country, family and past.

African films which depict life in the countryside often emphasise space rather than time. The skilful manipulation of time that characterises Western cinema is sparingly employed. Furthermore, in shots of rural life space tends to be depicted as communal or social rather than as individual. However, when African life within an urban or European context is depicted, space is frequently constructed as 'individual' and not 'social'. Individual space assigns the narrative discourse to a protagonist, an individual character. Social space, on the other hand, submerges the individual within a narrative which deals with a group and can only be understood in terms of its social context.

When African film-makers, on the other hand, treat an urban or metropolitan subject, the pace is quicker and the cutting more rapid. These elements of style convey a particular set of meanings in the African context. For example, *Soleil O* deals with an African working in Paris.

It makes use of cross-cutting, rapid camera movement and other devices familiar to a Western audience to portray the role of France in sapping African energy. These devices are used, not to build suspense as so often in Western cinematic practice, but to represent frustration. Because the film is dichotomised along race and class lines, cross-cutting signals not the development of an interpersonal clash, but rather a political and ideological conflict. The tug-of-war between these two stylistic approaches, one anchored within a Western cinematic tradition and the other in African culture, is increasingly becoming a central issue in characterising African cinema. Many African films employ both approaches within a single film, particularly where the theme of migration from rural to urban areas is dealt with.

Production and the Technological Determinants of Culture

No course on Third World cinema would be complete without a discussion of the problems attendant on the film-making process itself: in the African case, state governance and regulations, dearth of finance, the lack of a technical infrastructure, the virtue of 16 mm film for filming in the field, and the absence of any network for distributing films to their proper audience – the rural masses. Exposing Western students to the rough conditions many Third World film-makers face in the field should temper standardised aesthetic judgements as to what films should be and how they should look. The cultural dominance of Western cinema tends to enforce 'ideological carry-overs'. Western technological flash in particular impresses the urban African film viewer (and would-be film-maker) as well as the Western spectator, and abundantly imported American, European, Indian, Hong Kong and Egyptian films lead audiences to expect a certain level of technical brilliance from everything they see on the screen. This is a problem for the African film-maker who tries to develop a different style, a problem perhaps resolvable by eschewing the urban market for the rural audience. But the rural audience is troublesome because it is difficult to reach, given the cost of 35 mm film and the absence of distribution outlets.² The creation of an indigenously African film culture depends on

64 finding the means to show films on a continuing basis to this majority of the African population, which should form both the audience and the source of inspiration for an African cinema.

Toward a Critical Theory

The theoretical³ component of this course on Third World cinema strives to bring students to an understanding of the avenues available to them as future critics and theorists of cinema. Just as the textual component of the course familiarises students with, in this case, the subtleties of African cultural symbols, and a consideration of conditions of production enhances awareness of the need to make technique serve ideas, so in the last part of the course, students begin to deal with the critical and theoretical challenges presented by African films. The challenges emerge most clearly when


² Teshome Gabriel, *The Developing African Cinema: An Introduction*, Los Angeles, ASA/Crossroads press, forthcoming 1983.

³ For a detailed discussion of Critical Theory as it pertains to the African film experience, see my article entitled 'Toward a critical theory of African cinema', in Bennetta Jules-Rosette (ed), *Popular Art and the New Media in Africa*, Norwood, New Jersey, Ablex Publishing Corporation, forthcoming, 1983.

students find that received theories do not easily fit the films viewed in class.

What are the analytical tools that will permit a consideration of film texts and their conditions of production to inform an understanding of cinematic institutions in the Third World? The content and pedagogy of the course outlined here open up a possible means of answering this question, by suggesting three phases, or components, of a critical theory for Third World cinema, namely: a) 'the text', the films and their specific organisation of codes and sub-codes; b) 'reception', where audience expectations and prior knowledge of cinematic and cultural conventions govern the consumption of films; and c) 'production', where ideological determinants and factors of production shape the film industry and its organisation.

In Third World cinema in general, and in African cinema in particular, the thematic/formal characteristics of films and the critical/theoretical tools for understanding both texts and contexts are founded on traditional culture, and on socio-political action for self-determination and liberation. In a pedagogy which sets out with such different aesthetic and political conceptions, the position of the viewer/student is redefined and ideally, not only a cultural, but also an ideological, exchange takes place in the classroom.



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