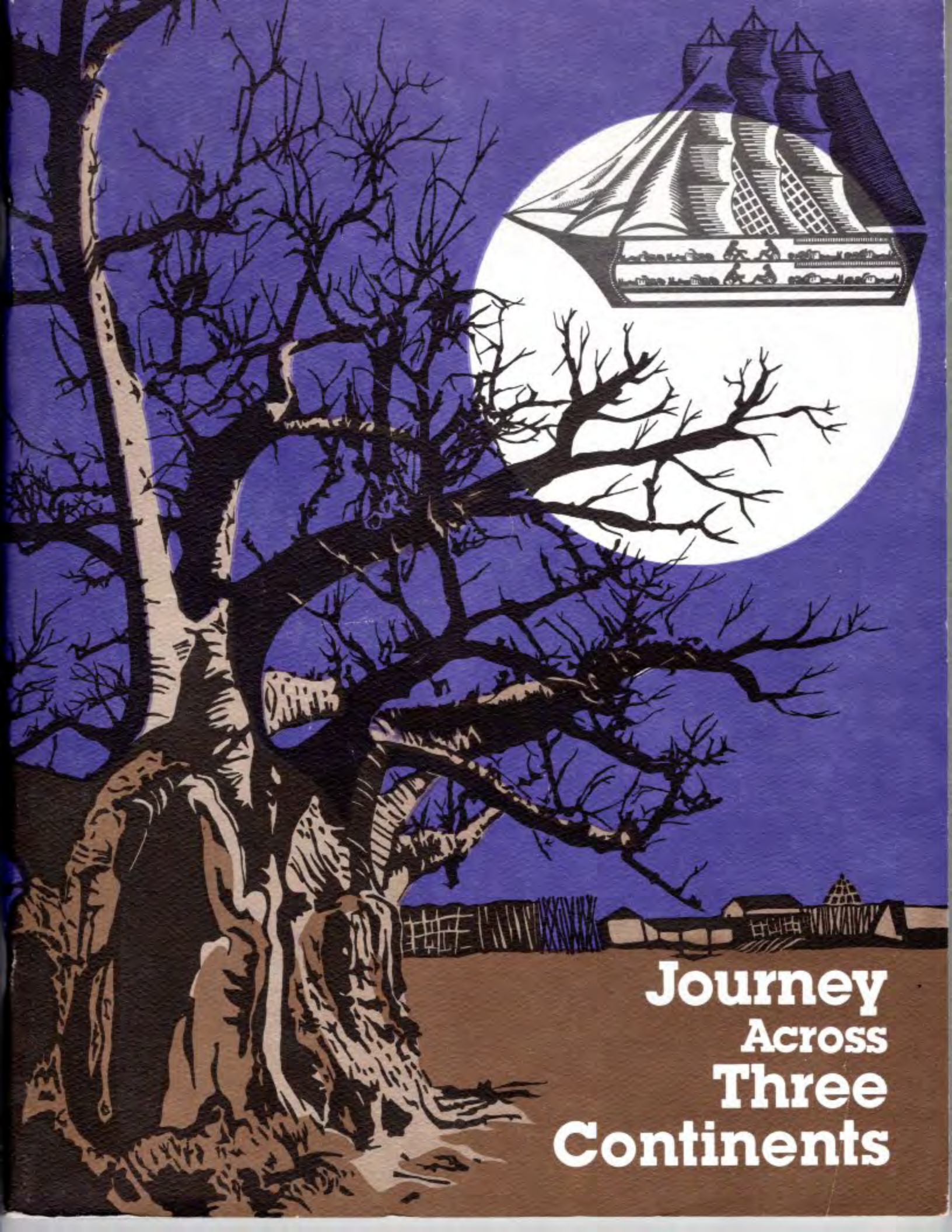

Journey Across Three Continents

Journey Across Three Continents: Film & Lecture Series

Festival Director	Pearl Bowser
Editor	Renee Tajima
Layout & design	Christine Choy
Intern:	Lynn Lewis
Printing	The Print Shop
Advisors:	Dr. Sylvia Arden Boone, Yale University Dr. Mbye B. Cham, Howard University Dr. Juanita Howard, Baruch College, City University of New York Dr. Rosalind R. Jeffries, Metropolitan Museum of Art Dr. Christopher L. Miller, Yale University Dr. James B. Pappas, State University of New York at Buffalo Dr. Clyde Taylor, Tufts University

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Introduction

"Black film art, consistently maligned by our tribal thinkers, will assume increasingly important and impactful dimensions in this country for the remainder of the 20th century. At this moment, only music is a more potent creative force in the collective consciousness of our people."

—Clayton Riley from** Chamba Notes, **1974

Since Clayton Riley's prophecy eleven years ago, black cinema has emerged as a creative force in the articulation of the black experience around the world. Cinema has become one of the most important ambassadors of the rich and diverse cultures of the African continent. Visions of Africa, through African eyes, brings us closer to the realities of a world that the western cinema has chosen not to see. In the United States and elsewhere, a black independent movement has come into its own. In particular, the past decade has been distinguished by a growing contemporary force of black women filmmakers, marked by the tremendous success of Euzhan Palcy's *Sugar Cane Alley* in 1984.

The Journey Across Three Continents series is a celebration of these achievements. The festival brings together a body of work that represents two decades of cinema from Africa and the black diaspora—films that tell stories, inspire, challenge, and speak to the breadth and scope of black life and culture.

To provide an historical context to black cinema, we can reach as far back as 1912 in the United States, when Bill Foster produced a short film entitled *The Railroad Porter*. Thus began a little known black independent film movement that thrived for at least two decades. Black American cinema has its roots in protest from the earliest efforts of men like Foster, George and Noble Johnson, Richard Maurice, Oscar Micheaux, and others. The philosophical approach of the Noble brothers, who founded Lincoln Pictures in 1915, was the *corrective* image—that is, to use film as a tool to convey positive role models. The successful, educated black heroes and heroines reflected their middle class ideals of respectability and assimilation into American society.

By contrast Micheaux used the film medium as a *directive* tool, creating a celluloid world dominated by blacks. He chose black on black themes of morality, religion, corruption, and alluded to the problems within the black

social structure of community, family, and the church. Whites rarely intruded upon the frame nor dominated it, as in close-ups. For Micheaux, the existence of whites is implied in his color-conscious stories populated by fair-skinned heroes and villains, and mustachioed heavies. On occasion, the comic relief was provided by someone of a darker hue, as in the minstrel make-up of the stand-up comics of *Ten Minutes to Live* (1932). In *Body and Soul* (1924), Micheaux was criticized by his audience for casting the fair-skinned Lawrence Chenault as a sleazy character, whom the rogue preacher (played by Paul Robeson) refers to as a "yaller nigger".

More recently, black independent filmmaking has resurfaced in the peaks and valleys of black film history in America. Since 1913, each decade has cradled a few visionary artists seeking to gain a foothold among the myth-makers of the American cinema. But the 1960's spawned a multiple progression of writer/director/producers who contributed to an emerging black aesthetic: among them Carlton Moss, sometimes referred to as the father of the black documentary, Bill Gunn, Gordon Parks Junior and Senior, Matt Robinson, Stan Lathan, and Bill Greaves. A recent generation of independent filmmakers has followed, many whom are represented in the Journey series: Haile Gerima, Charles Burnett, Kathleen Collins, and Billy Woodberry have directed feature films; and a long overdue feminist perspective has emerged in the works of Michelle Parkerson, Carol Mundy Lawrence, Carol Blue, Alile Sharon Larkin, Julie Dash, Ayoka Chenzira and others.

Like Micheaux, these filmmakers take their cameras into the streets and into the homes of the community—bringing to the cinema a different reality. These filmmakers speak directly to their audience, and share a common bond in the visual sense of place—a familiar terrain—that strengthens the myths they create on the screen.

The cinema of the black diaspora, common to black filmmakers in Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as North America, emerged in the milieu of growing black consciousness, that has its historical and aesthetic links in Africa.

African cinema is a relatively young art. In 1949, Senegalese filmmaker Paulin Vieyra made *C'Etait il y a Quatre Ans*, the first film produced in Africa by an African. It was not until 1966 that Ousmane Sembene produced *La Noire de . . . Black Girl*, the first African feature-length film. In a paper delivered to the Festav '84 film festival in India, Vieyra placed the early evolution of African cinema "in the great era of independent movements, when Africa was freed from the Colonial yoke." Herein lies a strong similarity to the literature of protest that emerged from the struggles against slavery and colonialism.

The consciousness of these films are manifested in many ways. They often capture an "historic movement" of great upheaval, but from the perspective of ordinary people as opposed to the conventional Hollywood approach of focusing on superheroes or elites. Similarly, the African filmmaker has emphasized the indigenous languages of the African people as a function of promoting unity and in response to western influence. Thus Sembene, who first produced films in the colonial French language, turned instead to Wolof to reach literate and illiterate audiences alike, just as he had earlier turned from literature to film.

The cinema of Africa and the black diaspora share the same focus of human and social concerns. The stories are often fables of the cultures or groups they represent. *Wend Kuuni*, for example, does not tell one boy's tale but rather tells the story of the individual in relation to the community. Ritual, in the form of repetition or patterns of speech, dance, behavior, is one of the means by which the characters bring meaning and harmony to a world temporarily disordered in the course of their life adventures. Thus Diouna, the Senegalese protagonist of Sembene's *La Noire de . . . ,* repatriates her soul to her community after the alienation and dehumanization of the cold and instrumental west. Ritual is present in the communal dances of *Sey Seyeti*, in the elaborate courtesies that the servant pays to the landowner in Gerima's *Harvest: 3,000 Years*, or the repetitions of a young girl's speech in *Ashes and Embers*.

These films are like guideposts offering glimpses into the mirror of each culture, reflecting back at the audience, and forging an aesthetic link to the entire black experience. However, black film is rarely recognized as a significant body of work in world cinema. They are generally regarded in isolation from one another, and of interest to specialized audiences only. They are rarely studied for cinematic or aesthetic meaning, nor recognized for the western myths they destroy.

The Journey Across Three Continents festival was conceived to expose new audiences to the works of filmmakers of Africa and the black diaspora, and to their cultures. The Journey package of films, speakers and written material was developed as a vehicle for encouraging discovery and discussion: to convey to the audience the shared kinships and rituals, history, traditions and diversity of the black experience from Africa, Europe and the Americas.

For the purposes of this catalog we invited a number of scholars, filmmakers and writers, some of whom have participated in the series, to provide in-

sights into the films and the historical, political, social and cultural influences which have shaped the sensibilities and concerns of the makers. Mbye Cham places black cinema in the context of the broader arts movements with worldwide links. Ferid Boughedir traces the development of African film institutions, and Haile Gerima speaks to the historic responsibility of black American filmmakers to forge a parallel independent cinema movement that defies the Eurocentrism of the film industry. Angela Gilliam provides a political analysis of the development of African cinema. Lieve Spass and Clyde Taylor explore the aesthetic influences of *La Noire de* ... Juanita Howard offers a sociohistorical background on blacks in Great Britain as a colonized people. Keith Warner, responsible for the English translation of the novel "Rue Les Casa Negres" by Martiniquan writer Joseph Zobel, reviews the book's 1984 debut as a film (*Sugar Cane Alley*).

The twenty years of black cinema represented in this festival is, of necessity, constricted by the availability of films and subtitled prints of works otherwise available. This festival is by no means all-encompassing, but hopefully it will inspire audiences to seek out more, and thereby rescue much that might otherwise remain unavailable.

Pearl Bowser
Festival Director
and Renee Tajima

Ashes and Embers

Ashes and Embers (USA)

Directed by Haile Gerima
1982, color, 120 min.

The episodic story follows black Vietnam veteran Ned Charles through his own personal hell—still angry and psychologically scarred after eight years home from the war. The film's structure is one of dialectical contrasts, both in its visual and dramatic content. It is set in a shifting milieu—predominantly black Washington, D.C., a ghetto situated among marble monuments and political power; the rural countryside of Charles' heritage; and Los Angeles "where dreams are created and black reality is a nightmare." Ned Charles similarly moves against a constantly changing tableau of people. There is Liza Jane, his activist wife; Grandma, who symbolizes the strength of his rural roots; Jim, his mentor; and Randolph, an aspiring actor. Gerima has orchestrated a lyrical, almost surrealistic tale which dances back and forth between past and present, rural and urban, Washington, D.C. and Los Angeles. Yet, **Ashes and Embers** is punctuated by the gritty realism of black alienation in America. And so Ned Charles' character unfolds as he becomes ripe for transformation, thus symbolizing the continuity and resilience of a whole people.

Baara . . . The Porter (Mali)

Directed by Soulemane Cisse
1978, color, 90 min., Bambara (English Subtitles)

Baara deals with class struggle in independent Mali through the eyes of Balla Diarra, who leaves his village to find work in the city of Bamako. Without skills or training, he makes his hand-to-mouth existence as a cartman, as do many other young men in the city. Cisse has constructed a filmic journey through the urban terrain in vignette style, as Diarra encounters the social ills that beset Mali. Life in Bamako is determined by the pecuniary nexus—money is a constant motif—and it is often as corrupting as it is scarce. The cartman comes across a pregnant woman who is being ousted by her husband; he is cheated by a market woman; and he sees the corruption of a factory boss, the new class of elites. In a city of abuse and mistrust, Diarra finally befriends Balla Traore, with whom he ironically shares the common bond of an ancestral slavemaster. Through Traore, the cartman is awakened to the workers' struggles in the factory. **Baara** portrays the continuing inequality of the classes that extends beyond the colonized past. In it Cisse has crafted a human portrait, spoken in the Bambara language, and conveyed with exquisite attention to detail.

Blacks Britannica

Blacks Britannica (England)

Directed by David Koff, produced by
David Koff and Musindo Mwinyipembe
1978, color, 57 min.

Blacks Britannica is an intense document of unrest in London's Brixton section, as British racism and the militant resistance of the first native-born generation of black Britons collide head on. Koff and Mwinyipembe weave the history of British oppression with contemporary footage: voices of black teenagers enraged over police harassment, abandonment by the unions, and alienation in the country of their birth. Their rage finally leads to violent clashes with the London police. The film's own history has been as controversial as its subject matter. **Blacks Britannica** has been officially condemned by the British government as "a danger," and it was then broadcast by American public television in a reedited version that the filmmakers charged was censored and distorted. The filmmaker's battle with public television resulted in an international defense campaign to protect and distribute the original film, led by the Committee of Custodians of Blacks Britannica. It is the uncut version that is being presented in the **Journey Across Three Continents** series.

Borom Sarret (Senegal)

Directed by Ousmane Sembene
1964, b/w, 19 min., French (English Subtitles)

Ousmane Sembene's essay on Senegalese street life follows a *borom sarret*, a cart driver, through the city of Dakar. Ly Abdoulaye manages to earn a meager living for his family by transporting people and goods through the shantytown. As in **Baara**, Ly's travels are a device for introducing us to the hardships of urban life. His passengers include an old woman, a man carrying his dead child to the cemetery, a pregnant woman. Before the day is over, Ly is cheated out of his wages and then loses his cart after an affluent man convinces him to go into a fashionable but restricted part of town. The irony of the cart driver's interior monologue and Sembene's economical visual style makes for a highly effective film essay.

Borom Sarret

*Cassie McFarland and Victor Romero in **Burning An Illusion***

Burning an Illusion (England)

Directed by Menelik Shabazz
1982, color, 110 min.

Burning an Illusion is a gripping contemporary tale set in the West Indian community of London. Pat and Del are young British-born blacks, among the many sons and daughters of Caribbean immigrants that migrated to Britain following World War II. Pat is a secretary who aspires to comfortable middle class life with marriage and all of its trappings. But her naivete and conventional aspirations are gradually eroded as she confronts British racism. Del's own experiences are a catalyst to Pat's growing consiousness. He is an unemployed toolmaker, trapped in the recessionary downside of present-day Britain, that has hit hardest at black youth. Del partially masks his frustrations and doubts in machismo towards Pat—underscoring her own awakening to her status as a black woman. Shabazz's portrayal of the young black lifestyle in London is strikingly familiar. **Burning an Illusion** could have been set in Chicago, Philadelphia, New York or any American city where inequality shapes the lives and conscience of a generation of black youth.

First World Festival of Negro Art (USA)

Directed by William Greaves
1966, b/w, 40 min.

The First World Festival of Negro Art brought together poets and dancers, musicians and painters—2,000 artists from around the world to a celebration of black art. The film weaves Langston Hughes' poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" into an historic documentary record of the festival. We see American legends Duke Ellington, Alvin Ailey, Hughes himself, discovering a spectacular program of traditional and contemporary art. Greaves produced, directed, wrote, and edited the film, shot on location with one cameraman and the Senegalese chauffeur whom he trained as a sound recordist.

Four Women (USA)

Directed by Julie Dash, produced by Winifred Tennison
1978, color, 7 min.

In **Four Women**, Julie Dash experiments with stylized movements and dress to express the spirit of black womanhood—from embryonic stage in the motherland of Africa, through the struggle for survival in America. Inspired by Nina Simone's ballad, **Four Women** is a blend of choreo-cinematography in an attempt to transcend the dancer's performance using the mechanics of film.

Four Women

Gouma

Gouma (Ethiopia)

Directed by Michael Papatakis, produced by Asrat Getahun
1976, color, 110 min., Ahmaric (English Subtitles)

Gouma is a parable of a young man's confrontation with life. The story begins with the innocence of boyhood friendship. Tariku and Zewde borrow a rifle and set off on a hunting trip. As Tariku takes his turn, he accidentally kills his friend while aiming at the game. A shepherd boy who has followed the two alerts the village of the death, and at first Tariku flees. But he eventually returns to accept his fate. Although Zewde's vengeful uncle demands Tariku's own life as punishment, the village elders decide to accord the ancient custom of *gouma* and the boy is forced into exile to collect blood money for the family. With broad strokes, the camera paints an Ethiopian landscape of vast proportions. The land dominates the frame across which Tariku's figure passes in exile. Yet the young man's real challenge is his own spiritual crisis, and the dramatic landmarks of the story are the people he encounters—the beggars who attack him, the blind man who rescues him, the woman who feeds him. Through Tariku's eyes, **Gouma** captures the spirit and essence of a traditional pattern of life.

Harvest: 3,000 Years (Ethiopia)

Directed by Haile Gerima
1976, b/w, 138 min., Ahmaric (English Subtitles)

Harvest: 3,000 Years tells the real-life story of a peasant family living under the feudal conditions of a wealthy landlord's farm. As in **Gouma**, the sparse Ethiopian terrain looms large. Against this backdrop the drama of the family's struggle for survival is played out. **Harvest** was shot in 1974, just before the fall of Haile Selassie, and as a popular movement began to foment opposition to the regime over Ethiopia's severe economic conditions. Gerima captures the spirit of this moment in Ethiopian history "where the harvest of centuries of oppression is the masses' feeling of freedom to overturn class tyranny," by dramatizing the clash of classes. As Kebebe, an itinerant musician, madman and revolutionary visionary collides head-on with the nameless, prototypical landlord, Gerima uses signs and symbolism to renegotiate the culture and mores of the ancient country during a time of violent transformation. A negative ritual act, the mother shaving her head in mourning, is juxtaposed with the image of the landlord to effect a positive, progressive element. At the same time **Harvest** is keenly realistic, adhering to the pace of rural Ethiopia, revealing the fine details of everyday life which is suddenly, violently disrupted.

Haile Gerima, director

Lonette Mackee and Rosanne Katon in ***Illusions***

Illusions (USA)

Directed by Julie Dash
1983, b/w, 34 min.

The time is 1942, and the place is National Studios, a fictitious Hollywood motion picture studio. The elegant, stylized photography of **Illusions** sets the stage for the story of Mignon Dupree, an executive at National with the ambition of becoming a film producer. Mignon, like many working women, has gained a better position due to the wartime draft. She is a black woman who is proud of her heritage, but is taken for white by her co-workers simply because she is light-colored. Mignon is compelled to reveal her identity when she encounters Ester Jeeter, a black woman brought in to sing the dubbed track for a white movie star. Ester is shrouded in the dark folds of the recording booth like a musical instrument, while the white star is an animated and glamorous figure on the silver screen. In a metaphorical play on the myths of Hollywood movie-making, Mignon is awakened to the inequity of color as they are drawn deeper into the fantasy of the motion picture.

Jom . . . Jom or the Story of a People (Senegal)

Directed by Ababacar Samb Makharam
1981, color, 80 min., Wolof (English Subtitles)

Jom is a Wolof word with no equivalent in Western languages. It is the origin of all virtues—the moral source of the individual. As Samb describes it, "*Jom* protects us against the absurdity of life. It keeps us away from lies and cowardice. It saves us from humiliation and offenses . . . *Jom* is beyond God and Evil." Samb provides a visual definition of *Jom* through the story of a present-day labor conflict set against historic anecdotes. The story begins in 1980, as a strike breaks out in a large industrial plant. The workers square off into two groups—one group fighting for better salaries and the reinstatement of laid-off workers, the other accepting management's new proposals. Khaly, the griot, or storyteller, is the trustee of traditional values and thus the unifying agent in the conflict. He tells the story of Prince Dieri who chooses to die rather than lose his *Jom* by capitulating to the French conquerors and their Senegalese puppets. By his words, Khaly performs the griot's ancient role of recalling an exemplary past—reminding the people of their *Jom* and inspiring them to resist the ruling class.

Jom

La Noire de . . . Black Girl (Senegal)

Directed by Ousmane Sembene
1965, b/w, 60 min., French (English Subtitles)

La Noire de . . . Black Girl explores the lingering racism that shapes the relationship between Africans and Europeans, even after decolonization. A young Senegalese woman named Diouna, is taken from Dakar to Antibes by her French employers. Ostensibly, Diouna is to work as a governess—a position she regards as a means of self-advancement. But once in France, she is treated as a maid—only the "black girl" who is abused by the Madame and so lives in captivity. Her disillusionment is articulated in an anguished interior monologue. "I'm only a slave." Dehumanized and alone, Diouna is driven to suicide. Yet it is more an act of resistance than despair. As film scholar Clyde Taylor points out, she is sending her spirit back home to rejoin her family and *omphalos*, or spiritual center. Director/writer Sembene based the story on a newspaper clipping about an African maid's suicide. **La Noire de . . .** is considered Africa's first dramatic feature, for which Sembene was awarded the 1966 Jean Vigo Prix as Best Director.

La Noire de . . . Black Girl

Poko (Burkina Faso)

Directed by Idrissa Ouedraogo
1981, b/w, 20 min., Moré

Poko and her husband await the birth of their first child. But when she goes into labor, the midwife finds that the pregnancy is complicated, and the village elders decide that Poko should be taken to the city for emergency care. All of the villagers pitch in to provide an "ambulance" for Poko, and some accompany the couple along the way. Despite these efforts, the unpaved road makes the trip hazardous for the young woman, and the story ends in tragedy. **Poko** calls attention to the uneven development between urban and rural areas in post-independence Upper Volta.

Sey Seyeti

Sey Seyeti . . . One Man, Several Women
(Senegal)

Directed by Ben Diogaye Beye
1980, color, 90 min., Wolof (English Subtitles)

The setting for **Sey Seyeti** is the medina of Dakar—a study in the contrasts of modern-day Senegal. Like many African filmmakers, Beye is concerned here with the conflict of changing values in a modernizing state. The dramatic vehicle is a recent law that requires couples to sign a contract before marriage, stating whether or not the husband will be monogamous. Through parallel stories of the relationships of three young couples, Beye explores the role of polygamy in the changing society. Their stories are drawn together by the common thread of marriage, and the debate over the choices they confront.

Sugar Cane Alley (Martinique/France)

Directed by Euzhan Palcy
1983, color, 103 min., French (English Subtitles)

Sugar Cane Alley is a remarkable film about a boy's coming of age on a sugar plantation in Martinique. It is 1931: Josephine Baker sings on the gramaphone and Hollywood pictures flicker at the movie house in town. But the two rows of run-down shacks that comprise the Alley look as they could have a century before. Surrounding it are the sugar plantations where adults toil day after day to provide their families with a meager existence. In contrast to the lush exteriors exquisitely captured by Dominique Chapuls' photography, are the dark interiors of the shacks lit only by the lively warmth of their inhabitants. Until nightfull the alley belongs to the children who play at their last carefree summer games before school begins. José is exceptional among them. he is an aspiring young writer who lives in the alley with his grandmother M'man Tine, a strong and loving matriarch who has fierce ambitions for her grandson to leave the alley with a scholarship to attend school in Fort de France. José is surrounded by characters alive with humor and depth. There is the old man who passes on to José his people's history in Africa; the goodhearted, dapper young gigolo who dreams of becoming a Hollywood movie star; the friend whose white father refuses to pass on his name to a mulato son. They shape and mold the boy's worldview, and ostensibly the artistic sensibilities of the young writer-to-be.

Sugar Cane Alley

Tauw

Ousmane Sembene

Tauw (Senegal)

Directed by Ousmane Sembene
1970, color, 27 min., Wolof (English Subtitles)

The city of Dakar is the backdrop for this story of an African family in conflict. Central to the film is a young man's futile search for a job, and in the course of this quest we witness the decomposing traditions of an ancient society. Tauw's problems are compounded when he learns that his girlfriend is pregnant. While Tauw accepts his responsibilities of parenthood, he has few practical options for supporting a wife and child. The old ways of life are symbolized by Tauw's father, whose rigid discipline and authority the youth cannot accept. He is left to find new answers to the difficulties of life in contemporary Senegal. Sembene's film is a portrait of the clash of generations: the old people who cling to Islam and polygamy, and the young who listen to rock music and steal without guilt. **Tauw** dramatizes the conflict facing an emerging nation as it reaches into the future while clinging to the past.

Wend Kuuni . . . Gift of God (Burkina Faso)

Directed by Gaston J. M. Kabore
1982, color, 75 min., Moré (English Subtitles)

In the tradition of oral telling, **Wend Kuuni** recalls a glorious past. "In those days before the white man had set foot on African soil, the country flourished, the granaries were filled with millet, the wells and rivers were full of water. Peace and happiness prevailed everywhere." It is the story of one mute boy, Wend Kuuni, or Gift of God. But the moral center to the film is the community that offers the individual protection and emotional nourishment. Wend Kuuni is orphaned tragically, and is lost in the bush. A traveler finds him there, and takes the boy to a nearby village where he is lovingly raised by a Mossi family. Slowly, Wend Kuuni becomes part of the village, helping to care for the animals and selling homemade goods in the marketplace. Pogue, Wend Kuuni's charming and mischievious young foster sister, eases along the healing process considerably. But it is not until a tragedy hits the village that Wend Kuuni regains his power of speech, and the trauma of his past is revealed. Kabore has crafted a lyrical tale that moves to the cadence of daily life. Through the warmth and honesty of spirit exemplified by the characters, Kabore achieves the filmic equivalent of a griot's tale—offering stories of the heroic past to provide guidance and inspiration.

Your Children Come Back To You

Your Children Come Back to You (USA)

Directed by Alile Sharon Larkin
1979, b/w, 27 min.

Your Children Come Back to You is a contemporary allegory about values and assimilation. Tovi, a little black girl living in the United States, represents a generation caught between two worlds, Africa and the west. Aunt Chris is completely Americanized. She believes that Tovi must be rescued from a world of welfare, winos, make-believe beggars and African fairy tales. Aunt Chris clashes with Tovi's parents over the girl's upbringing—Tovi's mother wants to raise her child with traditional African values, as her unseen father fights for his beliefs in Africa. But when she is confronted by personal tragedy, Tovi makes her own decision.

A Context to the Journey

Mbye Cham

"This festival invites us to come to grips with the essence of black cinema, and to reflect on its meaning for the future of the art form . . ."

Mbye Cham at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Despite recent developments in form and content, African cinema continues to suffer from what can best be referred to as a neo-Tarzanist mentality on the part of the average American viewer and, to some extent, of certain portions of the informed critical community. This is in part attributable to limited and, in most cases, deliberately distorted knowledge of the context out of which this cinema comes, and is largely due to the tendency to ascribe to this cinema an exotic particularity all its own. Africa cinema is thus divorced from the larger context of a black diaspora and Third World-wide cinema movement aimed at remolding this instrument of art, education, entertainment and ideology to serve and promote the needs and interests of the silenced and exploited world majority.

African cinema has its homologue in the black independent cinema of the United States, England and France, and in the various cinema movements in Asia and Latin America. Together, they capture and articulate the imaginative, the cultural and sociopolitical experience of individuals and societies linked by a common heritage, and a history of oppression and struggle. To have brought together films, filmmakers, critics and audiences from African and the black diaspora to reaffirm this sense of commonality and linkage constitutes one of the principal merits of the **Journey Across 3 Continents** film festival. Such a global approach enables us to appreciate the individuality (in terms of style, technique and feeling) of each film as well as see and understand the larger forces (historical, economic, social and cultural) that influence and shape this cinema.

A brief glance into history reveals similar to this festival in other areas of artistic expression. In creative literature for example, one can point to the 1920's and the orientation that establishes a link between the Negrismo Movement in Cuba to the Indigenous Movement in Haiti, the Harlem Renaissance in the United States and the Negritude Movement (of which the principal proponent remains Leopold Senghor of Senegal). The 1959 Rome Conference of black arts brought together artists and activist intellectuals from Africa and the black diaspora, a testimony to the awareness of a common bond of history and culture. The concept of Pan-Africanism derives much of its inspiration and force from such an awareness, and concrete translations have resulted in gatherings such as the 1969 Pan-African Cultural Festival in Algiers, Dakar's First World Festival of Negro Arts in 1966 and more recently, FESTAC in Lagos in 1976.

Although on a more modest scale the present festival is to be seen as part of this historical continuum, and with noteworthy new developments. The recent emergence of black filmmaking in Britain (*Burning An Illusion*, by Menelik Shabazz, *Blacks Britannica* by David Koff and Musindo Mwinypembe) constitutes one such development. The situation of black people in predominantly white, industrialized capitalist countries such as the United States and France has inspired the work of many black filmmakers (Haile Gerima's *Ashes and Embers*, *Your Children Come Back To You* by Alile Sharon Larkin *Soleil-O* by Med Hondo *West Indies*, etc.), but it is only recently that parallels began to emerge in

Britain with the coming of age of a whole generation of British-born blacks who are increasingly coming into an awareness of themselves as blacks in a white environment. Like their counterparts in other countries, these films by and about blacks in Britain constitute a reaffirmation of the common experience and challenge of black people the world over. In their challenging and affirmative stances, they become part of the mainstream of progressive African and black film thought whose broad contours can be mapped from the cumulative concerns and orientations of the films chosen for this festival.

It is not too often that one gets the opportunity in the United States and Europe, in particular, and even in Africa, to see and appreciate together ten or more African and black independent films that, to a significant extent, represent the history, the present, and the possible future direction of African and black independent filmmaking. The so-called "international" film festivals in the United States and Europe tend to ghettoize non-American and non-European films. This kind of discrimination accounts for the persistence of a neo-Tarzan mentality that has ominous implications for production and distribution of these filmmakers' works. Ironically, in spite of the odds, it is in African and black independent filmmaking that one witnesses the most consistent and studied effort to rescue cinema from the potential disaster of technological spectacle and space escapism and games, and to push it into new areas of artistic, social, political and cultural experience for the good and welfare of humankind.

This festival invites us to come to grips with the essence of this cinema, and to reflect on its meaning for the future of the art form, for Africans everywhere, and for human beings, in general.

Mbye B. Cham is a professor of literature and specialist on Third World film at Howard University in Washington, D.C.

Screening of ***Wend Kuuni*** *at The Metropolitan Museum of Art*

A Cinema Fighting for Its Liberation

by Ferid Boughedir

The African cinema at the time of the Organization of African Unity (OAU): it was in effect in 1963 that for the first time a film entirely conceived and produced by an African made its appearance on the international scene, was seen by a paying audience, and received a prize. That happened at the International Festival of Tours (France), and the prize-winning film *Borom Sarret* by Ousmane Sembene (Senegal) was established as the first film demonstrating great talent made by an African, opening the way to a cinema of fiction which would develop mainly in the "French speaking" countries of the continent (their "English speaking" or "Portuguese speaking" neighbors favoring on the whole the documentary).

The anecdote of *Borom Sarret* was simple but significant: a poor carter saw the tools of his trade confiscated by the police because he had dared to cross the frontier between the Dakar of the poor and the Dakar of the rich. The emotional nature of this tale, the restrained anger of the author compared with the kind experienced by the more humble, the use of monologue which makes us inwardly experience the plight of the carter, and moreover an open end which appeals to humanity and to the indignation of the onlooker, made this film a premature masterpiece by which, straight away, the African cinema seemed to establish the tone of what was going to become one of its major directions.

The application of picture and sound to the service of works of enlightenment arouses a consciousness of the realities of an Africa hardly out of colonialism and living the contradictions of freshly acquired independence. All the subsequent works of Ousmane Sembene, autodidact of the camera—who was a fisherman, a mason, a docker, then a writer before exchanging the pen for the camera "in order to speak even to the illiterate"—confirmed the vocation of the African cinema to inscribe itself as "awakener of the people," in total opposition to the cinema which had preceded it on the continent: that western cinema of "escapism" which the African producers accused of literally drugging the African public with its byproducts and of imparting values of foreign domination.

Domination by foreign companies

It is however in terms of the rivalry with this foreign cinematographic distribution that the (short) history of the African cinema will be written from beginning to end. For foreign films (often the worst rubbish of world-wide production) were distributed by the big western companies which controlled the cinematographic market of the African countries, and looked unfavorably upon the appearance of a young African cinema which was going to compete with their films and damage their profitability and their influence.

Several African countries such as Tunisia or the Upper Volta, having tried to create a national monopoly on the importation of films to control their market and reserve a "screen time" for their new-born production, were punished by boycotts as regards their supply of films. The big companies, who regrouped in joint responsibility trusts, obliged the states concerned to backpedal by imposing restrictions on their profit. Deprived of screens and of a paying audience, the African film would never be able to recover the cost of returning and giving birth to a second film—the African cinema was condemned to be still-born.

First success of the African cinema

In view of this situation, and above all in view of the inertia of their governments as regards the future of the cinema kept for minor and simple "amusement," the African film producers were quite naturally led to regroup their efforts in order to attempt a unity on the scale of the continent. A first opportunity to meet was offered to them with the creation, in 1966 by the Tunisian Minister of Culture, of the Pan-African festival of the "Cinematographic Days of Carthage" (which acclaimed the first full-length film by Ousmane Sembene *La Noire De*), soon followed in 1969 by the "Panafrican Festival of the Cinema of Ouagadougou" (Burkina Faso). The following year saw the creation of the Federation Panafricaine des Cineastes (FEPACI) which united 33 countries of the continent and whose creed, like that of the two festivals, was to be a voice of incitation directed at the African governments in order that they might take protectionist measures which were necessary for the survival of their new-born cinema—a cinema which confirmed its promise with first attempts that were as good as the works of masters.

The festival of Cannes in 1967 awarded a prize to the very beautiful *Vent des Aures* by the Algerian Lakhdar Hamina, which shows a lyrical and unforgettable sight: the sufferings of a mother during the war. The following years brought two new competent African film producers: Desire Ecare from the Ivory Coast with *Concerto for an Exile*, a bittersweet chronicle about the African immigrants in Europe; and the Nigerian Oumarou Ganda with *Cabascabo*, which shows the difficulties of the reintegration into his society of an African who is an ex-serviceman with the colonial troops.

Finally the Festival of Venice 1968 sanctioned conclusively the African cinema by giving an award to the first full-length color film by Ousmane Sembene, *Le Mandat*, which recounts in the tragi-comic mode the confrontation of the common man with the bureaucracy that arose from independence.

Ferid Boughedir

". . . a common market of cinematographic distribution was born stretching over 14 countries . . ."

It is a film which, for a long time, remained the masterpiece of its author, and which has done the most for raising the knowledge of the African cinema throughout the world. After this film, five great artistic tendencies were henceforth to divide the destiny of the African cinema, whether it be in the north or in the south of the Sahara. The colonial fate of yesterday and the necessities of development today have in effect created among all these works an astonishing continuity of themes, and of preoccupations which go beyond the existing frontiers. One rediscovers in the Maugrabin films, as in those of Black Africa, the struggle against colonialism and neocolonialism, criticism of retrograde traditions (notably maraboutism), rejection of western influence and its servile imitation, the division between town and countryside and its consequences, the rural exodus, demystification of the golden dream of emigration in Europe, and the denunciation of the lot of African women. This cinema seems to have made itself, in many respects, the worthy heir of the old tales of oral tradition which teaches us that the pursuit of money doesn't bring happiness and that fidelity to the given word determines the meaning of life.

The next stage in the history of the African cinema was marked in a significant way, by Algeria, the first country of the continent to prove that it was possible to break the stranglehold of the western distribution companies on the African market. Having made ample provision of films before decreeing a national monopoly on the importation of film in 1971, Algeria resisted for five years the boycott of the all-powerful Motion Pictures Export Association of America (MPEAA), which ended up coming to an agreement; by finally "granting" to this independent country its natural right to choose the films that it imported, and to free screen time for its local productions. It soon became one of the most well-provided of the continent.

Nationalistic awakenings

The success achieved by the Algerian cinema was to give rise to a series of cinematographic nationalizations in several African countries which took control of their screens. Senegal decreed a national monopoly on the importation of films in January, 1974. It was soon followed by Benin, then in 1975 by Madagascar. The Congo followed suit in 1979.

As Senegalese production expanded, Benin made its first full-length film, and Burkina Faso was already on its second. October, 1974 saw the climax of these initiatives during the fifth session of the "Cinematographic Days of Carthage," the first "conference on the distribution and production of African and Arabian films" uniting the leaders of the new national cinema societies. They concluded that it was necessary to regroup the African cinematographic market in order to create a necessary profitability from local films: profitability that had been impossible in each isolated territory. At the subsequent conferences which took place again at Carthage and at Ouagadougou, at Mapulo, Mozambique and at Mogadishu, Somalia, the film producers managed to work out a three-point strategy for the liberation and viability of the national cinemas in Africa—a strategy depending entirely on intervention by the state.

The success at Cannes

The year 1975, which saw the triumph of African cinema on a worldwide scale: the *palme d'or* of the Cannes Festival was awarded to the Algerian film *Chronique des Annees de Braise* by Lakhdar Hamina, thus carrying-off the supreme prize of the greatest festival in the world. The same year, a veritable school of Senegalese cinema was born with several films produced by the Jeune Societe National de Cinema. Most notably were *N'Diangane* and *Garga M'Bosse*, by the prolific Mahama Traore (about lost childhood and the dramas of drought), and *Xala* by Ousmane Sembene, a vitriolic parody on the congenital impotence of the new African bourgeoisie who wanted to imitate the west.

The Mauritanian Med Hondo carried off the main prize of the "Days of Carthage" festival with *Les Bicots Negres Vos Voisins*, in which he deepened his reflections on immigration that he explored in the preceding film *Soleil-O* (1970). Abhellatif Ben Ammar (Tunisia) presented *Sejnane*, a film on the foundation of the struggle for national liberation. The Cameroonian Jean Pierre Dikongue-Pipa and the Senegalese Safi Faye, Africa's first producer, created a sensation by the originality of their films *Muna-Moto* and *Lettre Paysanne*. All these films are of an international style, and bear witness to a maturity and an astonishing artistic quality, especially in light of their derisory financial means and their lack of future outlets. The African cinema seemed to have attained its "golden age": it was to be short lived.

The response of the foreign companies

The conference of Tunisia in October 1974, had been attended by, among others, two guests as "observers": they were, in fact, the representative of the MPEAA who reigned over the Maghrib and English-speaking Africa, and the representative of the Union General Cinematographique, (PDG of L'UGC), the French group whose subsidiary company, Societe de Participation Cinematographique Africaine (SPACIA) dominated the cinematographic market of the whole of French-speaking Western Africa, having repurchased the circuits of the former colonial companies SECMA and COMACO. From then on, the foreign companies radically changed their approach to the problem—the Algerian example having proved that the time of direct

confrontation was gone. Instead there had come the time of "amicable" agreements designed to safeguard national sovereignty, which had become a sensitive issue, whilst at the same time preserving the presence of the same number of Western films on African screens. The result was a boom in foreign films threatened for a moment . . . and a clear regression of the number of African films produced.

Continuing its policy of apparent Africanization of its cinematographic market, SPACIA transformed itself into Union Africaine de Cinema (UAC) and started to sell its cinema houses to African individuals, to try and preserve the most important thing: the importation-distribution of the greatest possible number of foreign films, bought at low cost on the world markets (with, at the top of the list, Indian films and Chinese karate films), and making an excessive profit on African soil.

Soleil-O

The birth of the CIDC

Then a new African partner made its appearance: the Consortium Interafricain de Distribution Cinematographique (CIDC). One of the regional consolidations that the film producers had formed by their votes, and whose general principles had been voted by several African states of the French-speaking west. It was finally set on its feet in 1979, with a film producer at its head, the Nigerian Inousa Ousseini. A "common market" of cinematographic distribution was born stretching over 14 countries—Senegal, Mali, Mauritania, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, Niger, Togo, Benin, Cameroon, Gabon, Congo, Chad, Central Africa.

In view of the will of the states, the UAC at the end of 1980 agreed to resell its portfolio of films to the CIDC on such conditions that France would remain one of the privileged suppliers of this market of "French-speaking" countries: nevertheless, for the first time, a common market of film distribution in Africa was really controlled by Africans, who could finally introduce African films there in the normal fashion. This is what the CIDC is committed to. It has distributed since its first year some fifty African films. By trying to introduce this paradoxically new product into the market on its own soil, it regularly comes up against the unwillingness of the owners of cinema houses who prefer to put on what they know: Italian westerns, Italian melodramas, or karate films.

However, the African film has slowly begun to take its place, and the public is helping to conquer the oppostions to the system. It triumphed with the two films that carried off the main prizes of the seventh and eighth festivals of Ouagadougou, *Djeli* by Fadika Kramo Lancine from the Ivory Coast and *Finyé*(*The Wind*) from Soulemane Cisse of Mali. The two films, although considered "cultural" and not commercial enough for the owners of the cinema houses, have nevertheless beaten all box office records in their respective countries.

1982: The manifesto of Niamey

Assembled in conference at Niamey, Niger in March, 1982, African film producers drew up a manifesto in which they readjusted their earlier stance. The experience of the last 10 years had, in fact, shown the shortcomings of total nationalization. (Too many governments considered the "seventh art" as an instrument of propaganda and have only financed films which glorify the government.) The film producers now called for a balance between State-controlled and private enterprise. The State would have control of the distribution market and voting of protectionist laws in favor of national production—above all the "cultural type." The private producers (that is to say more often than not, the film producers themselves) would have the freedom of choice of subjects, in a system which would guarantee their financial downfall.

Now that the governments have begun to curb the appetites of the suppliers of foreign films, the film producers would like to break away from a state protection that would be too omnipresent. Their new creed is as follows: the cinema must be financed not by state budgets but by money from the cinema. What money from the cinema? That which is spent everyday by millions of cinema-goers to see often very bad foreign films, and of which a part—the taxes—must rightfully return to local film production.

While waiting for this to come about in all the countries concerned, there will certainly follow yet many more conferences, many seminars, many manifestos. The (too long) march of the African film producers towards economic viability of their films continues, even if artistically and culturally, the African films have become an undeniable reality.

*Excerpts from the paper read at the first Third Eye Festival, London

Visual Footprint: The Battle for the Film Frame

by Haile Gerima

Filmmakers are primarily story transmitters who are equally governed by their specific national, and cultural characteristics. The film storyteller uses the most advanced and powerful tools of sight and sound to culturally transmit diversified values. This cultural expression is primarily physical, sociological, as well as psychological.

The history of film has been undemocratic and characterized by a dictatorial Eurocentric industry. This industry has historically excluded Third World nationalities from realizing their own human vision on film. Consistently, this system as it has existed has failed to respond to the needs of these groups. Even though individuals, as performers, have appeared intermittently to satisfy the conception of Europeans, there has never been a full and equal participation in the creative process. As a result, Third World people, specifically, Native Americans, African Americans, Latinos, and Asians continue to declare the formation of their own cinematic outlets.

Concerning African Americans, the highest stage of an independent film movement became apparent during the 1920's. In this period, glimpses of an African American film aesthetic emerged. At the height of this period, independently-owned African American film companies were established. The African American aesthetic that emerged was a restless and ambivalent one. However, a hostile political, cultural, and economic environment contributed to the diversion of African American filmmakers from the exploration of sight and sound that was necessary to develop their own film language. The sporadic efforts at shaping a film aesthetic were never considered serious, and being different in film accent was regarded as savage and primitive. As a result of this psychological pressure, the whole African American middle class of this period abandoned their historic responsibility of exploration and experimentation. The Europeans, in their cultural role as jury, as financiers, and as patentors, dismissed and omitted the African American cultural and aesthetic sentiments by their silent and violent chauvinism, disguised behind the rubric of technical standards. They continue, to this day, to dismiss aesthetic attemps by Third World filmmakers as purely a lack of technical efficiency. Though it is true that in the 1920's, African Americans often camouflaged in black skin, imitations of the industry's character models. I am convinced that it was primarily the European chauvinist environment that finally contributed to the disintegration of the black independent film.

In the 1960's and 1970's, the social, political and cultural climate in the United States gave birth to a small-scale documentary and dramatic African American cinema movement. Films of active militancy that corresponded to the times emerged in certain parts of the country. Films of diverse quality and social relevance came into being under the most adverse production conditions. Although often unorganized and sponteneous, some of these early filmmakers continue to produce films of great intensity to this day. Their films have succeeded to an amazing degree nationally, as well as internationally. However, if this movement is to continue to survive and expand in the future, it is very important to be concerned about one very

". . . Our accent and temperament must be perfected and be visible throughout our work, as we organize these aspects of sight and sound. It is this stamp, footprint, that testifies to our having lived on this planet."

critical aspect of filmmaking—that is, a meaningful economic institution that is capable of responding to low-budget film production. This institution should be equally concerned with organizing the production, distribution, and exhibition aspects of motion pictures. Without the above considerations, there will result a further deterioration and tragic disintegration of the African American film movement.

In order to intensify the necessary dialogue concerning the present African American independent cinema movement, there are certain crucial and vital points that need to be raised and addressed. First, we need to answer the most ambiguous but important question: what is an independent filmmaker? In the specific case of cinema—and the struggle to develop an institution that is capable of responding to the cultural needs of a given community—we must recognize the very cause of the battle is the continuing failure of the existing film industry or system to respond democratically to the needs of all people. The undemocratic nature of the industry forces the oppressed nationalities into declaring independent institutions that are capable of accommodating their own cultural needs. This open and justified declaration is economic, political, and cultural in content and form, with automatic and logical consequences. Philosophically, it proposes a long-range objective vision that aspires to replace the existing system. It assumes that certain primary elements that bring about this cultural independent will be set in motion. It confronts, head-on, the decadent existing film conventions and grammar as it builds and advances its own film language. I consider this process a primary historic responsibility to those who are devastated and deformed culturally by the existing order. This responsibility brings into full view the temporary state of the present cultural arrangements of the world. An examination of today's cultural outbursts of all Third World peoples testified to this reality.

The African American film movement should carefully analyze the basic philosophical departures inherent in the present dilemma. African Americans have to begin collectively to explore the very political issue of independence and all of its consequences. The antagonistic status quo, to my mind, is incapable of participating in and bringing about this independent cultural vision. The issue of independence presupposes a futuristic vision of form and content. This could be obtained by genuine and innovative ventures into the very medium of the cinema. The many years of stereotyped characters and models have to be destroyed and replaced. These false and demented childhood models have to be erased from the mentalities of human beings. It is the choice of the independent filmmaker to join the struggle for economic, political and cultural liberation—a process already set in motion by the examples of these earlier pioneers—or remain the concept of the false, demented imaginations.

In the eighties, independent African American and other Third World filmmakers urgently need to extensively discuss and constructively and democratically debate the true concept of independent cinema. Hand in hand with the movement, there is a great need to create the necessary institutions that will help strengthen the continued development of independent film production in order to live up to the justifiable cultural demands of our people. Equally important is the need to encourage and build diverse innovative approaches to the search for independent financial resources. There is a great need to mobilize and organize and involve these potential contributors in this process of liberation.

We need to search and make concrete links, nationally as well as internationally, with those whose ideological vision is in harmony with that of our own. There is a need to devise more innovative production approaches in order to facilitate and accommodate our reality. In independent film production, one must encourage cooperative and non-competitive relationships. With each film completed, we must attempt to multiply our responsibilities by inviting and encouraging the participation of the community in general. We must turn each production opportunity into field schools for creative educational relationships with the rest of the community. We must bring the unskilled—as long as there is necessary motivation—and mix them with those who are skilled in the know-how of motion picture production. In general, if the mechanisms of production, distribution, and exhibition are organized in a more pragmatic manner, the demand for our cultural expression is boundless. Without any form of intimidation from the existing establishment, we should pursue our creative potentials ot the fullest in order to transform content as well as form in the motion picture. Our accent and temperament must be perfected and be visible throughout our work, as we organize these aspects of sight and sound. It is this stamp, footprint, that testifies to our having lived on this planet. We need to respect our audiences, for they deserve the best quality of our creative endeavors. It we are to live up to these responsibilities, we must cease to be imitators. We need to explore the innovations and possibilities of our cultural and historical responsibilities.

Bringing our new vision to our films is what is expected of us. Every frame, every shot, and every scene, no matter what length or size, must vigilantly contribute to changing the system that oppresses the world economically as well as culturally. This historic and cultural responsibility is above cinema in itself. Whether it is projected in a theater, church, basement, prison hall, alley, or under a tree, this cinema must initiate the dialogue of change.

Haile Gerima is an award-winning filmmaker, and associate professor of Film/TV at Howard University.

Two Women

by Clyde Taylor

The psychological space in Hollywood movies is dominated space. It is dominated by the individual hero, usually a single white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant—WASP—male adventurer. The scene is set and framed to reverberate the drama of his ego. The world is background in relation to his own highlighted foreground. WASP women and white ethnic men transit in and out of this center to interact with the hero as lovers, sidekicks, or adversaries. Mainly, people of color are relegated to the chaotic margins of the frame, occasionally allowed a minor supporting role.

Rightly understood, the pyramidal configuration of this space-framing formula is the visual paradigm of "reality" as perceived in the popular, American/western world view. The shaping of this space is ordered to reflect the social weight and volume of the world's class structure. the almost valueless life of a native urchin boy acquires weight the more he idolizes the single white male—SWM—hero. (A little "colored" girl hardly ever figures into the action, even as an icon.)

The power of the paradigm maintains itself, despite alterations of the signs arranged within it. It carries its own hegemonic message, even if the focal figure is a doomed and guilty male sinner, a woman, or a black. The pyramid of psychological relations says to the viewer—you, the individual, will always dominate, even in error, over a world stratified in dual opposites of good and evil, rich and poor, white and black, male and female, smart and dumb, meaningful and insignificant.

The psychological space of black world cinema, on the other hand, is shared space, communal space. The focal individual is representative of communal reality, or communal predicament, before being the point of identification for a consumer-viewer. In contrast with the western screen, a greater balance is sought between individual and surrounding figures and scenes. This reflects the balance with nature (as opposed to the dominance of nature) that is the cardinal point of orientation in African cognitive reality.

This orientation toward balance instead of domination redistributes the weight of the meaning on the screen. It also creates a challenge to interpretation. Western critics of African literature often complain that characters in African novels are not fully developed. As westerners, they are expecting the weight of a certain egotism, when the emphasis is deliberately placed elsewhere. In cinema, the difficulty of competing with the paradigm of ego-domination should be obvious.

The problem is illuminated by sociolinguistics. Consider these three sentences. These examples are adapted from M. Holzman, *Language of Children* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1982).

1. Get ready to take a letter.
1. If it's not out of your way, will you mail my letter?
3. Let's go mail these letters.

Sociolinguists examine the different power relations reflected in the first two sentences. the first is an imperative, an order, as between boss and secretary,

employer and employee. It is the relation adopted by western cinema at its most aggressive. Sentence two, reflecting reciprocity, is closer to the characteristic relations of black cinema. The third sentence extends the relation implied in the second towards mutuality, solidarity, and communality.

The character of these two orientations dramatizes a contrast between an arrangement built on the unequal exchange of ego-satisfaction versus an order that strives towards equal exchange and pluralism over Manicheanism. In other words, black cinema at its most thoughtfully directed pitch, is aiming at a revolutionary redistribution of psychic rewards.

The burden of shifting the oppressive weight of the values of dominated cinema is not negligible, particularly when the focal character of a film is a woman—a black woman—who stands as the opposite end of its power spectrum. When black women and colored girls enter the structured spaces of the west, they are threatened with weightlessness and invisibility. "We were all illusions in those days," says Mignon, the central figure in Julia Dash's *Illusions*, speaking first of black women, then other women, and finally, those functionaries who worked in the propaganda mills of Hollywood during the Second World War. The original title of Ousmane Sembene's first feature film, *La Noire de . . . Black Girl*, similarly suggests anonymity and invisibility—a literal translation of the French (*La Noire de . . .*) gives us *The Black Female of . . .*

The anonymity of this title cuts two ways. It speaks to the instrumental way the Senegalese heroine is viewed by the French couple who transport her to the Riviera to be governess to their children. But it also speaks somewhat to her representative Africanness. More specifically, on the symbolic level, Diouna (she does have a name) represents African spirit at the point of achieving independence from Europe.

So it is pointedly useful that she is not too specialized a personality, is not well educated, is naive to the ways of the world, is eager to advance, is sublimely indifferent to the history of Africa's past freedom fighters (as illustrated in the scene where she walks atop a monument dedicated to such leaders and forerunners, much to the dismay of her boyfriend), and is fatally willing to put herself into the hands of Europeans as means of advancing her future.

Most of Diouna's experiences, viewed as a realistic vitae, are resonated by this spiritual-symbolic dimension. It is the wax beneath the gold, to employ an analogy critic Teshome Gabriel applies to Sembene's films. She feels betrayed, then, when she accepts a sojourn in France as governess of her employers' children—a position implying responsibility and some degree of self-development—only to have the dead-end menial tasks of a house servant thrust upon her.

The consequences of her trust in her employers and venture into their world is an incredibly complete loneliness. What is dramatized as loneliness is in fact what she comes to feel as an ultimate alienation—separation from her world of meaning and from her self. A kind of original cultural richness is imparted, but then symbolically destroyed, by the dress of beautiful African print material that she wears about her employers' house, until her mistress demands that she stop doing so. Her European employers have placed her in a position where no development or preservation of self is possible, and this condition is indicated by her linguistic isolation. She understands French about well enough to receive orders and rebukes, but not well enough to speak it (to be an instrument of her environment, but not to control it). She cannot read or write. Her dependence is most painfully exposed in the scene where her employer reads to her a letter from her mother, then writes for her a letter filled with thoughts he thinks she should be feeling.

It is necessary to consider a broader context in order to understand her suicide. According to African ritual belief, Diouna is sending her spirit home to her people. It was with such sentiments in mind that thousands of captured Africans threw themselves in the sea rather than be transported in slavery to America. They were sending their spirits back to their ancestral *omphalos*, or spiritual center.

Another point about her suicide should be noted. She takes her life in anger, in a spirit of resistance against the dehumanizing treatment of her employers. One might frame her act by the lines from the African American spiritual:

Before I'll be a slave
I'll be buried in my grave
And go home to my Lord
And be free.

(Diouna may not have known these lines, but Sembene is very familiar with African American tradition, and used black gospel music on the sound track of his later film, *Ceddo*.)

"When black women and colored girls enter the structured spaces of the west, they are threatened with weightlessness and invisibility..."

The ritual-symbolic element of *La Noire de . . .* is deepened by the central icon of the mask. As Diouna in some way represents African spirit at the time of "independence," the mask connotes the spiritual aspect of Dio-

una. The mask is key to the film's symbolic interior. Its career through the course of the film both parallels Diouna's destiny and amplifies it. Originally a ritual object of spiritual power and significance, the currency of the mask's magical force is presumed spent by the Africans among whom it circulates as a decorative item, until Diouna picks it up cheap in the marketplace.

Diouna gives the mask to her employers as a gift. They place it on the wall of their Riviera apartment. When Diouna becomes totally disgusted by their treatment of her, she takes it back, removing it from the wall. In this sequence, Sembene makes an adroit commentary on culture and economics. Traditionally, among Africans, gift-giving is guided by principles of equal exchange. Gift-giving is a way of recognizing each other's mutual self-worth, even when the parties are of unequal social rank. The gift I bestow at your daughter's wedding expresses a recognition that is ackowledged and reciprocated several years later by the gift you give at my son's wedding. The dominant principle of maintaining a balance with nature is extended here to preserving a balance of recognition within society. Diouna's European employers do not reciprocate her recognition of their humanity.

Their behavior towards her expresses the principle of unequal exchange that flourishes in western societies and that, before all else, dominates the relations of Europeans with people of color. Among Europeans and their descendants, an unequal exchange, a bargain, a "killing" in the market, a windfall, a lion's share, the bloated margin of profit, is an honored social goal sanctified by religious doctrines. Unequal exchange is not only the driving motivating force behind capitalism, but it also motivates a symbolic or cultural capitalism, in which a much-valued currency is recognition of one's self-worth at the expense of others.

Hegel, Fanon and Memmi explain that those driven by the lusts of unequal exchange—the master, the lord, the colonizer—expropriate the recognition of self, and withhold it from the slave, the servant, the colonized. Diouna's employers don't know how to treat her otherwise.

The shot of the African mask, the central decoration of the otherwise blank and sterile white wall in the ersatz Riviera apartment, allows Sembene to make a rich statement about the alienated uses of African spiritual values by the West. Sembene is also masterfully aware of how the principle of unequal exchange, instrumentalized through the master-servant, or colonizer-dependent relation, suffuses all dimensions and areas of those relations, including the cinema. He would agree without hesitation, I think that the arrangements of world cinema vis a vis black cinema thoroughly echo this pattern of dominance. Therefore, it is possible to see a subtext relating to black world cinema when Diouna snatches her mask down off those blank white walls and sends it back to Africa.

The mask is, of course, revivified once it is sent back to Dakar. By this time we can see that is unified with Diouna's spirit. Once again, it becomes a power instrument, a ritual spokesman when the young boy mounts it before his face and drives the European employer out of the medina, literally the old African quarter of town, but figuratively out of Africa. The true meaning of Diouna's suicide, which is hard to accept on the level of Western realism, is underscored by her subsequent revival and triumph as expressed through the symbolism of the mask's recovery of its power. African spirit, if it accepts tutelage within western dominated space—and this includes cinema—will die. It can redeem itself by returning to its spiritual centers, driving western value-orientation out of its reclaimed creative space.

If we turn from *La Noire de . . .* to *Illusions*, a film by African American director Julie Dash, the outlying contours of the drama are hauntingly similar. Diouna's situation in her employer's

La Noire de . . . Black Girl

Riviera apartment is a trap, not of physical confinement, but of psychologically dominated space. Such is Mignon's situation as an executive in National Studios, a Hollywood production firm, during World War II. Mignon, in fact, has entered the lair of the beast from which the psychologically domineering space of western cinema emanates.

Immediately, one detects variation in the posture and attitudes of Mignon in contrast to Diouna. And in some ways, the differences between Mignon and Diouna, and their situations, reflect the variations between African and African American postures within the larger framework of black world cinema.

Mignon, as an African American woman, is much clearer and more free of illusions about the system of domination than is Diouna. Both are searchers, as central figures in black fictions are apt to be. The African American hero—more perceptive though she may be about the odds confronting her—finds one of her goals, her sense of self, to be more problematic and a full-scale project in itself. Moreover, the happy equilibrium she envisions as a desirable future, is sketched as utopian without definable precedents. The Sembenian hero typically confronts a societal puzzle. The hero of African American cinema experiences life as dislocation, exile, a scramble for a posture by which to reinforce her humanity—in a way that is often metonymic for the quest of her people.

Mignon is not simply a victim of the domineering space she must venture through. She probes its lineaments and searches for cracks, extenuating circumstances, and creative opportunities to shift its weight to the advantage of a more humane ecology. *Illusions* is, in actuality, an ironic essay about the industry of psychological domination. The people who run National Studios understand clearly that their job is to create propaganda for a system that provides them with unequal rewards. Though several generations removed from the African ritual identifications that orient Diouna, Mignon also searches, in a more directed way, for a humanistic equilibrium and a more equal exchange among people all within an undominating nature. As an executive in National Studios, where she is taken for white, her game-plan is to bring cultural diversity to dominant cinema. One of her projects, characteristically, is a film reflecting the contribution of Navaho Indians to the American military effort.

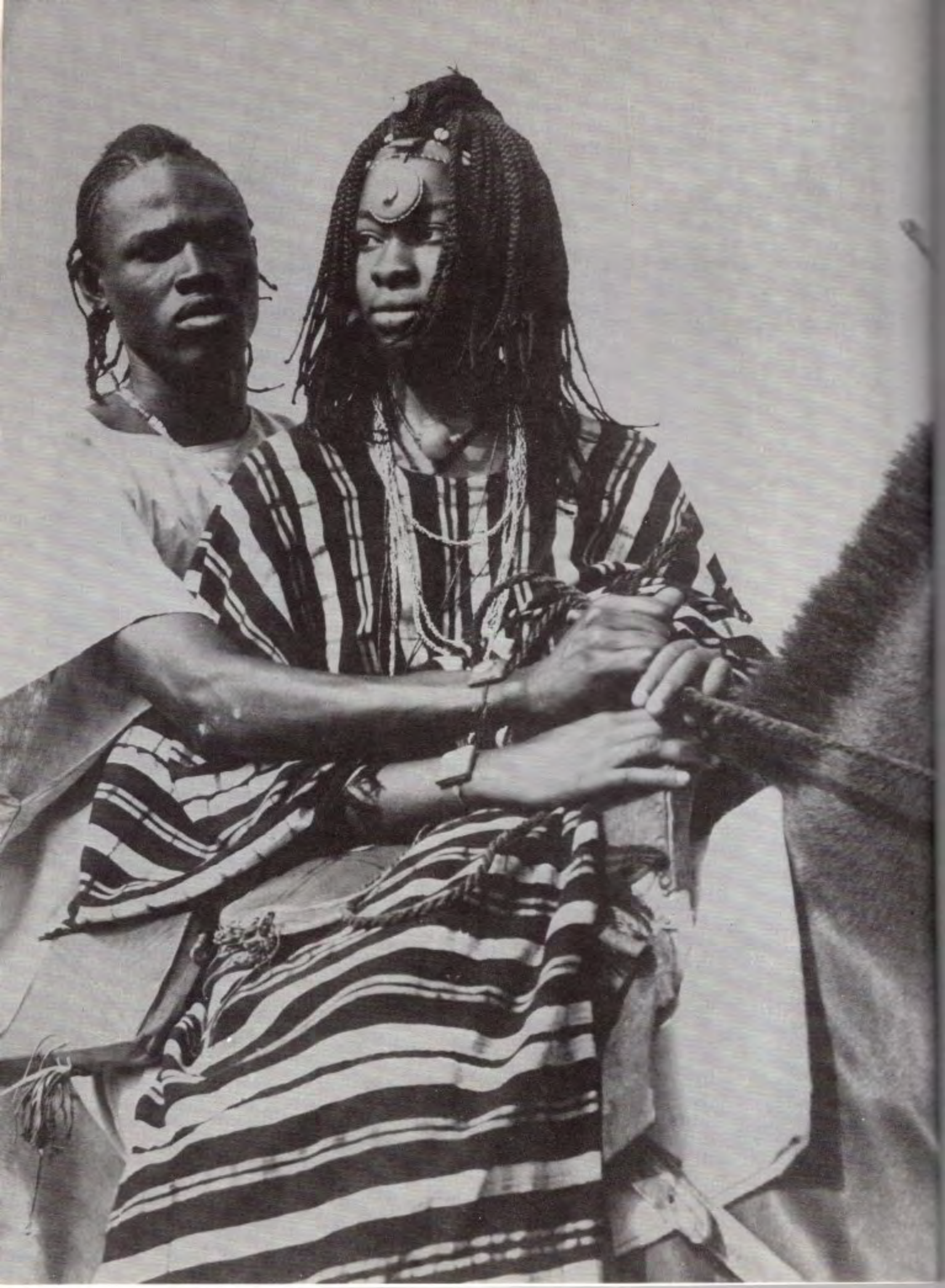
The complete irony of *Illusions* is that the film is created within the paradigms of the domineering psychological space of Hollywood. It is a parody of a "B" movie of the 1940's. As such, it sets up the pyramid of power relations as a tactic for satirizing and subverting it. Mignon's persona is set in the scheme of a driving career woman hero, searching for individual fulfillment, in the familiar tradition of Joan Crawford and Barbara Stanwyck. The fact that her goals are social, political and humanistic, underscores the illusoriness of the traditional goals. Hollywood sets before women viewers, as much as it betrays the hollowness of its patriarchal, male archetypes.

And *Illusions* also has its masks and maskings. In the marvelous studio scene, the white female star (who is always partially coded as a blonde) wears the mask of the universal, beautiful woman. Her image conceals the at least equally beautiful reality of the black woman, whose magical singing voice is dubbed in as hers. (The voice actually belongs to Ella Fitzgerald, whose own movie career was a rummage sale.) Mignon also wears the mask (African American dualism), allowing her co-workers to identify her as white, for ends more significant than mere personal gain. But the most imposing mask portrayed in *Illusions*—and this one is coolly ripped off—is Hollywood itself. An industry posing as an institution of democracy, moral education and pure entertainment, but really in the business of masking with charm and bogus sex, appeal the fundamental inequity, the bullying unfairness of the social system it is a part of.

We are, or should be, psychically renewed by the heroic example of these two black women; by Diouna, who considers and finally chooses suicide as a weapon; and Mignon, who fights what is probably a losing battle from within, against the pyramid of reaction—for their common struggles illuminate the rainbow of possibilities in a social order where human values take precedence over the values of power and property, where the plurality of cultural and personal spaces are negotiated through rituals of mutual, and mutually respecting relationships.

Clyde Taylor

Clyde Taylor is an associate professor of English literature and film scholar at Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts.



Female Domestic Labor and Third World Politics in *La Noire de...*

by Lieve Spass

For Ousmane Sembene, Africa's foremost film director, film can make visible the abuses of power, render manifest what governments would like to keep hidden, and speak to the western world about its oppressive power and to Senegal, his country, and to other Third World countries about their oppression. Film, Ousmane believes, overcomes the problem represented by Third World illiteracy, since it is accessible to literates and illiterates alike. This explains why Sembene has turned to Wolof instead of French in his recent films. In using film to draw attention to the Third World western dichotomy, Sembene contributes considerably to the development of political film.

Ousmane Sembene was born in Senegal in 1923. He started life as a fisherman and then went to l'Etoil de Ceramique at Marcassoum; from there he went on to Dakar and worked as a plumber, bricklayer and apprentice mechanic. He served in the French army in World War II. After the war he became a docker and trade union leader in Marseilles. Anxious to make films, he turned to Jean Rouche and other filmmakers but failed to gain their support. In Moscow, he spent a year learning film under Stalin-favored director Mark Donskoy. Sembene's most important films are these: *Borom Sarret* (1964), depicting the day of a Dakar cart driver; *Tauw* (1971) rendering the despair of a 20-year-old Senegalese who looks for work on the docks of Dakar; *Emitai* (1971) in which the women of the village provide resistance in a clash with French colonialists. *Xala* (1974) shows the paralyzing effect of some of Africa's own traditions as well as Western oppression, an oppression prolonged by Senegal's government. Finally, the most recent film, *Ceddo* (1977), censored in Senegal, focuses on Islamic structures of oppression in the early period of Islamization. Sembene's personal experiences and artistic achievements merge. Each of his films questions an existing social problem and also reflects Sembene's political background, i.e., that of a Europeanized African intellectual with American ties, a communist artist influenced by neo-realism.

La Noire de... is a film rooted in Senegalese society, that is to say, the story of the black "girl" does not represent a self-contained story but a narrative originating in an existing society. *La Noire de...*, therefore, exemplifies the importance of some key fiction films for a study of society. The French title, *La Noire de...*, contains an ambiguity lost in the English translation, *Black Girl*. The elipsis following the preposition *de* leaves unspecified whether that *de* means *from*, that is to say, coming from a specific place, or

Ceddo

whether it is the possessive *of*. The latter would indicate that the black "girl" is someone's property. The elipsis evokes both meanings in French.

La Noire de . . . 's visual composition exploits the obvious black/white dichotomy. The black-and-white cinematography provides the formal and semantic basis of the film. Diouna wears a white dress with black dots; her suitcase is black; the apartment seems entirely in a black/white color scheme; the food prepared falls into the same categories—black coffee, sterilized milk, white rice, even the whiskey consumed generously by the Frenchman bears the label "Black and White." The music also shows such oppositions: western music alternates with African music, juxtaposing on another level the black and white contrast. The opposition is enacted most dramatically when the camera focuses on Diouna's inert black body in the white bathtub.

In a facile reading, such an opposition might seem the mark of an inexperienced filmmaker. Yet the film, although one of Sembene's earliest, already contains too many signs of subtlety to allow for such interpretation. The obvious binary structure of the film corresponds to the crude binary system that underlies any system of oppression and exploitation, a system that divides the world into two opposing categories: the oppressed and the oppressors. While erecting a network of black/white contrasts, the film does not establish a male/female opposition along the same lines. The black woman is most directly exploited not by a man but by a white woman; moreover she obtains permission from her mother, and not from a man to follow her employer to France. Domestic labor might in this sense seem to be presented as form of all-female exploitation, but the context for the domestic labor created in the film suggests a link between female domestic labor and the general political structure.

Illiterate, Diouna has no knowledge of France besides that gained from the alluring verbal reports of the French women and from the glossy pictures of an *Elle* magazine brought by her boyfriend on one of their meetings in Dakar. Her image of life in France springs entirely from these representations of women. She expects to find beautiful shops where she will buy elegant clothes from wages she earns. The *Elle* women in bathing suits lead her to imagine her own picture taken on the beach and sent to Dakar where "they will be envious." Instead, Diouna virtually becomes a prisoner in a French apartment. The France she dreams of is replaced by the sum of the rooms she cleans, the noise of the quarrelling neighbors upstairs, or the "black hole" she perceives from the window as she looks out over the dark Antibes bay.

The more Diouna enacts the image represented to her in Dakar, the more she incurs the anger of the French woman who contributed to the image creation. Instead of buying beautiful clothes, Diouna is given an apron and required to take off her high-heeled, western-style shoes. While conveying dismay in her interior monologue, she utters not a word out loud besides, "Yes, Monsieur," and "Yes, Madame." The most painful contrast between expectation and reality concerns "her picture on the beach." In fact, she is never photographed by the sea; instead, the viewer sees her dead body in the bathtub and, immediately afterwards, holidaying people in bathing suits on the beach who are reading the account of her suicide, which has now become a journalistic story in the *Faits Divers* (local occurrences) section of the newspaper.

Although the film focuses almost exclusively on Diouna's situation, her exploitation and death are not rendered as isolated events: the film links them to the death of other Senegalese in Europe, namely those who died in World Wars I and II. In her study, Marsha Landy mentions this link; however, the political dimension of this reference needs stronger emphasis, especially in the light of the boyfriend's attitude. Shortly before Diouna's departure for France, she and the boyfriend are near the monument commemorating these wars. A brief vision of veterans putting a wreath on the monument flashes through the friend's mind. When Diouna, unaware of the monument's importance, dances barefoot on it, rejoicing over her imminent departure for France, the friend becomes outraged at Diouna's "sacrilege" and tells her to come down immediately.

The sequence has a twofold implication. First, as Landy mentions, Diouna's dance on a war monument prophesies her death. Second, Diouna's departure for France and her suicide there become linked to the Senegalese political involvement in World Wars I and II. The friend's respect for the monument reveals the pride he takes in the courage and sacrifice of his Senegalese compatriots. However, by linking the two forms of sacrifice, the film suggests his idealism is politically naive. Diouna's going to France parallels Senegalese soldiers' participation in these wars. These soldiers had gone to fight for France's freedom; they were "honored" to die for the "fatherland." Similarly, Diouna's work frees the French woman, and her death, although self-inflicted, is not unlike that of a soldier. Her belongings are returned to Dakar; her clothes, like the uniform of a slain soldier, taken back to the mother and a sum of money offered in compensation. The linking of Diouna with the soldiers suggests that behind the overt exploitation lies another one, deeper, covert, and political.

In France, the white woman is depicted as the manifest oppressor, openly hostile and overly disrespectful. In contrast, her husband, the white male employer, is portrayed as a humane and mildly courteous Frenchman as a few of his gestures suggest: he carries Diouna's suitcase, inquiries about her trip, and picks up the mon-

Emitai

ey which she drops. He shows understanding of her depressive mood, comprehends her possible nostalgia and need to go out, and even suggests a holiday for her. Moreover, the film does not depict a stereotypical sexual exploitation of the white male employer over a black female servant. On the contrary, the film stresses its very absence by creating a situation in which such sexual abuse could occur, when semi-drunk and bored, the employer remains alone in the apartment with the black maid. In a physical confrontation between his wife and Diouna over the African mask, although his wife sees only Diouna's "ingratitude," he points out to his wife that the mask, although one given by Diouna, still belongs to the maid.

The incident offers a striking opposition between the husband's placidity and the wife's vicious anger. In fact Diouna's exploitation displaces the French woman's own possible exploitation. When Diouna rebels, she represents a real threat to the wife, but not to the husband, as is apparent from Diouna's own remark: "Never again will she tell me: "Diouna, wash the shirts of Monsieur." Since he is not directly threatened by Diouna's possible rebellion, the husband can be civil and more humane. Yet he still functions in the general context of expoitative capitalism. The husband is through his placidity peripheral, and through his capital central. Upon seeing Diouna's distress, he immediately offers to pay her; after her death, it is he who offers monetary compensation to the mother in Dakar. Both daughter and mother refuse the money, and in their refusal reject a system in which labor becomes a commodity and money a means to pay for death.

Diouna's domestic oppression, voiced and enacted mainly by the white woman, veils an entire political system of exploitation in which not only does the husband take part but which extends to Diouna's own country. In fact, the film suggests that the Senegalese government and black elite at large participate in maintaining capitalist oppression. Friendly, relations between France and Senegal, advocated by President Senghor, are clearly criticized by Sembene in the film. At a party in the couple's apartment, discussing their own working conditions in Senegal, they explain the material advantages laid down by government agreements: a large part of their salary paid in France, housing provided, bi-annual repatriation to France, etc. When the guests inquire about safety, the colonials reply, "As long as Senghor is there, things are safe."[2]

Although overtly critical of such agreements that institutionalize and promote colonialism, *La Noire de . . .* also shows that oppression is sometimes solidly established in the Third World country itself. In fact, the film suggests that the intellectual group to whom Diouna's boyfriend belongs and black politicians both condone oppression. While clearly against Diouna's leaving for France as a domestic servant, the Senegalese boyfriend does nothing to deter her from her decision. He espouses African values, visually depicted by a flag in his room honoring the Congo's advocate of freedom, Patrice Lumumba. Yet he also displays naive pride at the political suicide of Senegalese soliders, and contributes to Diouna's consumer mystification of France by providing her the glossy *Elle* magazine.

The film reveals on several occasions the ambiguous attitude of the Senegalese black elite. As Diouna looks for work in the fashionable sections of Dakar, she passes three handsomely dressed Senegalese politicians who are leaving the National Assembly. Upon seeing Diouna in African dress, one of the three exhorts the others to speak more softly, clearly fearing that this representative of "the people" ("I have been elected by the people") might hear their political machinations to promote their self-interest.

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The political elite is not the only target of Sembene's criticism; he also comments on the intellectual class represented by public letter-writer, teacher, and students. The first flashback in the film, a shot in Dakar, shows an African mask which a little boy, presumably Diouna's brother, is wearing. The public letter-writer sits at a nearby table and orders the boy to take off the African mask, an order which suggests a rejection of African values in favor of literacy. The various shots of the local school, that also draw attention to Senegal's growing class of literates, reveal an all-male attendance. In fact, not a single Senegalese woman is seen reading in the film, while men are frequently seen with a book in their hand. Literacy thus becomes identified with a male/female dichotomy. The fact that women stay illiterate has disastrous results for Diouna. The mother/daughter tie, a tie stressed in the film, gets brutally ruptured when Diouna goes to France. The contact between the two women requires writing, i.e., male mediation. In France, although the French woman can write and Diouna's mother asks her to write on Diouna's behalf because that woman "is also a mother," nevertheless, the husband replies and translates Diouna's silence into sentences. He writes that she's doing well. Such a reply, initiated and composed entirely by her employer, raises Diouna's suspicion: she cannot read her mother's letter, her mother cannot write, and Diouna cannot write an answer. The letter triggers Diouna's final drama as she realizes that she has no defense: "If I could write," she speculates, "I would tell them . . ." Her death becomes her way to speak and write rebellion, a rebellion expressed earlier in her fight over the mask.

The acts that preceded Diouna's death in France are repeated in Dakar. Her refusal of money is reenacted by her mother; her taking back the mask is repeated by the little boy. The first gesture rejects Western economic exploitation, the second reappropriates African ones. Significantly, three illiterate Senegalese of three different generations carry out these acts of protest. However, the male/female treatment here falls prey to a traditional prejudice. The film has the woman killing herself and the boy chasing the French man: woman is victim, boy is male avenger of the future. The film uses the female figure as metaphor for colonialism. Sembene exposes some aspects of sexual oppression but does not treat the sexism *per se* as a political reality that can be dealt with, fought and changed. While using the woman as metaphor artistically to solve some basic conflict, nevertheless, the director is caught in unresolved contradictions; and certain very fundamental issues of African feminism, such as polygamy, are not touched upon in this film. In *La Noire de . . .* neo-colonial exploitation cuts across the male/female opposition and is seen operating in the disguise of a political cause such as World Wars I and II or a promise of freedom to participate in a consumer-oriented society. The film works best as a militant inquiry into neo-colonialism in its many forms.

[1]Cf. Sembene's own statement about monetary compensation from France in an interview with *Jeune Afrique* (27 January 1973):

Jeune Afrique: Do you receive a pension?
Sembene: From whom?
Jeune Afrique: From the French army.
Sembene: No, and I do not want one.

[2]Michael Crowder in *Senegal: A Study of French Assimilation Policy* writes: "[it] becomes increasingly galling to Senegalese in Dakar, where unemployment is rising, to see Europeans doing jobs which could easily be undertaken by themselves" (P. 85). It is significant that the Senegalese Mission to the United Nations in New York was very unwilling or unable to give any information on Sembene. When I expressed astonishment over the fact that the Senegalese official on the telephone had not seen any of Sembene's films, he replied promptly: "I have not missed anything in not seeing his films."

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Oumou Diarra in ***Baara***

African Cinema as New Literature

by Angela Gilliam

There are several points of reference that bear discussion if one is to truly understand the context within which African cinema is developing, and which provide the backdrop for the Malian film *Baara*.

First of all, it is necessary to understand Africa is at once attempting to emerge from centuries of colonization and domination, and at the same time, engaging in a new battle—the war for access to and control over information. As Anthony Smith noted: "To be imprisoned inside the misinterpretation and misunderstanding of others can be a withering form of incarceration."

The logical extension of this anomalous entrapment is that Africans are essentially the receivers of information in a vertical, one-way flow. That is, the books, films, television hardware and software, and other forms of mass communication are carried to the African people by forces which represent the economic clout in their respective countries. More often than not, these forces are tied to the former metropole, which has likely retained considerable control. The flow of information within this structure is thus vertical—imposed within a hierarchy, and transmitted from a dominant element to one with less power.

Those who transmit information within this hierarchy see the giving of information as their exclusive preserve. To receive information from those who are presumably inferior would be unthinkable. But that is precisely what Africa and much of the Third World is demanding. The vehicle through which this demand is being forced is under the aegis of the New International Information Order. The clamor being heard around the world—including Africa—is for the right to give the world information about one's own society. Given the fact that African society has been defined by western scholars as the "antithesis" to the European "the-

sis," it is within the newly-independent African countries that the decision to participate in the dissemination of the definition about one's own society becomes most insistent.

For example, the onslaught from the South African regime's propaganda machine was such a success that last year the Ministers of Information from the Frontline States and Nigeria met in Kadoma, Zimbabwe, to formulate a strategic response to the systematic disinformation involving their countries.[2] Throughout southern Africa, there is an awarenessof the "geopolitics of information." Feature films and documentaries are seen as weapons in the arsenal of those who battle for the "hearts and minds" of the world.

Some of the most innovative efforts by African filmmakers to define their own reality have been in the merger of traditional forms of communication with the "modern." In *Ceddo* and *Emitai*, for example, Ousmane Sembene uses an abstraction of traditional oral history, interweaving fantasy and legend with a more conventional feature film plot. In their study for UNESCO, the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems reached this conclusion.

> *Therefore, there are basic questions about the links between modern and traditional media from the viewpoint of their mutual influence or reciprocal and complementary support. The main challenge both to policy makers and communication practitioners, is to find a formula to preserve the relationship between traditional and modern forms of communication without damaging the traditional ways nor obstructing the necessary march towards modernity.*[3]

Filmmakers throughout the world are debating what are the most effective ways of merging the traditional with the new. Euzhan Palcy, the director of the award-winning film from Martinique, *Sugar Cane Alley*, maintains that it is necessary to constantly investigate the interlocking relationships among oral, written and cinematic traditions.[4]

Sometimes the confrontation with the status quo will force the filmmakers and their nations to investigate the relationship between film and power, and thereby forge new approaches to form and content. One such example is the cinema of Algeria.

"Some of the most innovative efforts by African filmmakers to define their own reality have been in the merger of traditional forms of communication with the 'modern.'"

After the Algerian revolution ended in 1962, one of the first groups of laws passed were those relating to a new cultural policy. The new government decided that all films that were to be shown in Algeria had to be related to the goals that the society was setting for itself. Consequently, the typical fare of violence, sex and nonsense, that are the themes of so many films from the United States, would no longer be allowed.[5] This decision produced interesting results. It brought Algeria into direct confrontation with the Motion Picture Export Association of America over who decides which films are to be imported into a given country. Because of the stand-off between this United States company and the fledgling nation, no films from the United States were shown in Algeria. But Algerians, like other peoples throughout the world, were addicted to films as a form of entertainment. The only solution to this quandary came with the sudden emergence of the rapid production of films which are geared to addressing a nation's problems in ways that are entertaining—one of the prime lessons for African filmmakers. Algerian films contribute to moving the society forward; they rarely evoke the pathological as "fun." In any event, the extraordinarily high quality of Algerian films is legion throughout the Third World. It is a tragedy that the Film Institute of Algeria does not put subtitles on the films. As a result, many outside the Arabic-speaking world have not been able to appreciate them. Nonetheless, the Algerian experience has been instructive to African filmmakers.

By contrast, internationalism is one of the guiding principles of Cuban cinema, and most Cuban films have been seen outside the country. African filmmakers have been influenced by the Cuban practice of historical reconstruction and reinterpretation through cinema. A good case in point are the films about slavery in Cuba. It was necessary to reinterpret Cuba's history according to the demands of a revolutionary society, and its new cinematic values. Cuban people had been conditioned to the simple and simplistic "good guy vs. bad guy" models of Western films. Cuban filmmaker Sergio Giral, who made the trilogy about slavery, *The Other Francisco*, *The Bounty Hunter* and *Maluala*, refers to this formula with its easily identifiable hero, as "the direct method."[6] The heart of this method is using Hollywood techniques while incorporating new messages and themes. And African filmmakers have experimented with this method as well.

What is ironic about the spread of American films abroad is that the very good, controversial films from the United States are often prevented from international distribution. An example of this is the author's experience with United States Embassy personnel in Papua New Guinea, while organizing the first international film festival in that country—focusing on the theme of

Baara

social justice. Embassy personnel refused a request for aid to get the Academy Award-winning film about the Vietnam War, *Hearts and Minds*, saying, "These people are too emotional for that film." By and large, African filmmakers have only been able to see these films outside of their own countries.

One of the reasons that African filmmakers rarely get to experience the cinematic dynamism of the international film world is that colonial or neo-colonial governments regard critical media images as threats to their sustained power. If the masses of people see films that are actually designed to enhance their critical capacity to relate film themes to their own lives, then a repressive state machinery is in danger. On the other hand, some filmmakers believe—like Argentine directors Solanas and Getino—that it is impossible to develop "a truly national cinema with the [repressive] system, especially when this system, in practice is anti-national as a norm and anti-popular as a doctrine."[7] Kenyan writer, Ngugi wa Thiongo, makes the same point in a different way. In discussing the reasons for his detention in Kenya, he comes to the conclusion that it was due to his having been "involved in the writing of a play in the Gikuyu language, *Ngaahika Ndeenda*, and in its performance by a group of workers and peasants from Limuru to an . . . enthusiastic audience."[8] Here we see how potent the issue of language can be for African artists. Ngugi blames much of the crisis around African culture and language on the elites in government who fawningly espouse Western values and European languages. In referring to his play and its relationship to Kenyan elites, Ngugi says the following:

> *For reasons best known to themselves, some propertied individuals who were obviously well placed in business and government circles objected to the fact that the play faithfully reflects certain social conditions, particularly the conditions of workers and peasants in Kenya today.*[9]

And those social conditions were being portrayed by workers and peasants in their own language.

As Ngugi moved from novels in English to plays in Gikuyu, so has master film craftsman from Senegal, Ousmane Sembene, moved from writing novels in French to producing films in Wolof. In his earlier works, like *Borom Sarret*, Sembene puts French in the mouths of his protagonists. The dialogue is therefore stifled, and limits this otherwise brilliant example of African cinema. Given the relationship between political economy and language in most multilingual, neo-colonial societies, it is illogical to hear French in the silent thoughts of an illiterate cart driver. But the target population for the film—a magnificent expose of the ravages of colonialism—is the educated French-speaking foreigner, not the typical Senegalese.

Yet, as the filmmaker makes the transition to one of the national languages in his/her country, he is criticized by Western observers of the film that "This is not cinema, it is ethnography." The ideological implications of that perspective are the topic for another paper, but it is nonetheless useful here as an understanding of the subtle forces of colonialist thinking with which African filmmakers must contend. In addition, the "art for art's sake" paradigm of American and European cinema is often at odds with films that attempt to address the issues of economic underdevelopment, illiteracy, the colonized mentality, and the workers' strikes. Furthermore, some of the most political African films do not use the simplistic European villain to address the colonial legacy. Rather they put the conflict between good and evil within a strictly African context. Both Sembene and Soulemane Cisse have painted brutally accurate portraits of the ruling classes in Senegal and Mali, respectively.

Cisse is particularly subtle in his attack on reactionary "autenticite," a movement named for the manipulation of the Zairian people by the dictator, Sese Mobutu. As a strategy for maintaining the appearance of Africanization in Zaire, Mobutu announced, a few years ago and with great flourish and fanfare, that all Zairians should have African names and that his would no longer be Joseph but Sese Mobutu. Yet, Mobutu accompanied this symbolic Africanization with ever-greater theft of the Zairian people's revenues from the mineral wealth of the country.

Therefore in *Baara*, when Cisse pans the camera on a modern building with a huge cowrie shell—African symbol, par excellence—the building of the repressive textile factory owner, he is making a statement on many levels. He unmasks autenticite for what it is and shows that symbols can be appropriated by the most corrupt of governments.

By the militant portrayal of the contradictions in Malian society, detailing the depiction of class struggle in Mali, Cisse avoids the pitfalls that await many an African artist. African writer, Stanislas Adotevi, asserts, "The black poet who does not participate in his or her people's total struggle merely exercises 'negritation' and ultimately. . . connects to the people's movement exclusively through song."[10] Cisse, however, has made a commitment that is reflected in the choice of Bambara as the language of the film. By portraying the disjunction between "old" and "new," the colonized past and the independent present, he avoids simplistic solutions to national problems.

Like Ethiopian filmmaker Haile Gerima who puts the words of political clarity in the mouth of the town crazy man in the epic *Harvest: 3,000 Years*, Cisse puts wisdom in the mouth of a drunk. When that moment comes, it is even more startling because it catches the viewer by surprise. The central question of the film is put to the protagonist: "Whatever happened to our revolutionary projects to change social conditions?" This question is juxtaposed to a continuation of the opening shots of a man's perspiring face. Is this the portrait of a slave in the 18th century? Or a laborer in the 20th century?

These are questions thrust forth by this new literature—a literature that takes into account the possibility that the viewer may not be able to read. This literature is directly accountable to the people it describes by being linguistically accessible to them.

African cinema has yet another hurdle or obstacle to overcome, however. What good is it to make films like *Borom Sarret* and *Baara*—shown together during this film festival—if they cannot be shown in the countries where they are made? The films of both Sembene and Cisse have sometimes been banned in their own countries, a painful contradiction, like the one plaguing Ngugi. For whom do I create and why? This question is critical when one is surrounded by the false definitions of modernization and development. In addition, the control of many cultural forms is tied to continued economic exploitation by Western countries. Thus, a second question arises: is it possible to have an independent cinema in a neo-colonial situation?

African cinema reflects the conflict of contemporary Africa—of artists striving to utilize a technology of the West for purposes of the intellectual decolonization of masses of people, without being consumed by the very same hardware and software. In the midst of this, drought, militarization of the entire continent, and the attempts to legitimate the South African regime's concerns about the African continent have become interwoven in the art of that region.

Film makes possible the breaking of rules about constituency and relevance. And for that reason, African cinema speaks to all who participate in this new and dynamic, cultural form.

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Angela Gilliam is an associate professor of social sciences in the politics, economics and society program at the State University of New York, College at Old Westbury, and a member of the National Alliance of Third World Journalists.

On Adapting a West Indian Classic to the Cinema: The Implications of Success

by Keith Q. Warner

Gary Cadenat in ***Sugar Cane Alley***

It is rather significant, for the purpose of the discussion that follows, to note that the Martiniquian writer Joseph Zobel included a very detailed description of a West Indian cinema audience of the period between the world wars in his novel *La Rue Cases-Nègrès*, which has itself now been transposed to the silver screen under the same title for French-speaking audiences, and *Sugar Cane Alley* for English-speaking ones (at least in North America).[1] At the time of writing, Zobel most probably did not envisage that one day his work would be interpreted for a cinema audience—one which, though possibly more experienced, would exhibit some of the same gut reactions as those of his fictive audience:

"The lights would go out one by one and everybody would scramble to the chairs to sit down.

At the first images on the screen, the cinema would become relatively silent. For all that, in the darkness, conversations and comments continued, attracting anonymous replies that clashed, exploding into violent discussions laced with jeers and threats. In the long run, however, the atmosphere turned out to be inoffensive and even pleasant—simply foreign."[2]

Zobel's description highlights two aspects of the cinema audience of the period that bear emphasizing. First, it shows the impassioned reactions of one section of the patrons as they become more and more involved in the

events unfolding before them on the screen. This state of affairs that has hardly disappeared completely, especially among those in the stall or "pit" section (the lowest priced seats that are situated closest to the screen), who, according to Michael Lieber in his book *Street Life: Afro-American Culture in Urban Trinidad*, "tend to interact with the film, much to the annoyance of those in other sections," and are "raucous and continually on the lookout for double-entendres."[3]

Second, the description further shows that, when all was said and done, what remained was an atmosphere that was "simply foreign." In other words, films, like written literature, remained almost the exclusive domain of the outsider, with the West Indian having no input at any stage: none in the original writing, none in the interpretation, none in the eventual production. Now, whereas in the field of literature there has been considerable "localization" over the past two decades, the same cannot be said for the world of films. With very few exceptions, all the films we see in the West Indies come to us from abroad, there being nothing even close to what one could call an indigenous cinema. What, then are the implications of an indigenous written work finally brought to the screen?

Zobel's is the first major West Indian work in English or in French to be made into a film and given wide distribution and press coverage ever since the 1967 film *To Sir, With Love*, the commercially-popular adaptation of E. R. Braithwaite's novel starring Sidney Poitier. The adaptation of Jacques Roumain's *Gouverneurs de la Rossee* (*Masters of the Dew*), filmed in Haiti with Haitian actors in 1975, was produced for television in France, but did not go beyond that medium. The very successful *The Harder They Come* from Jamaica, was originally a film, and only later was it novelized. Other indigenous film productions, like Trinidad's *Bim*, were not adaptations of well-known works, though credit must still be given to the writers of those original scripts.

The West Indian public has apparently grown so accustomed to regarding commercially-oriented feature films as strictly the province of the foreigner, that once indigenous scenes and locations began appearing, it found difficulty relating to them from an artistic point of view. Frequently, in the exuberance of self-recognition, the cinema audience shifts its focus from the actor in character to the actor as person—one recognized, say, as a neighbor or a local personality—from a location used a backdrop to its private relationship with the place. A constant distraction from the screen often results, as members of the audience point out, either to their friends or to no one in particular, their personal experience with the person or place being shown. It would be difficult, in such an atmosphere, to develop and maintain the necessary critical impartiality, if indeed this is even deemed necessary. The problems that beset early West Indian literary works, namely the public's unwillingness to accept the local and familiar as genuine literature, also beset the emerging West Indian cinema.

"With very few exceptions, all the films we see in the West Indies come to us from abroad, there being nothing even close to what one could call an indigenous cinema."

In view of the obvious interaction between film and audience, it is reasonable to assume that in the West Indies the cinema would have great impact in its portrayal of themes that purport to make a particular statement. Once an audience gets over the initial "exuberance of self-recognition," the familiarity and self-identification with people and places on the screen would create a degree of relevance to the lives of West Indian viewers that a foreign film with foreign themes could never achieve. A director seeking to do this, as opposed to one merely seeking box-office success, would, as a result, find the task relatively easy. An example is Euzhan Palcy's adaptation of Zobel's novel, which continued the work that the novelist started with this semi-autobiographical look at Martinique in the years between the first and second World Wars. Zobel's success has clearly been due to the fidelity and sensitivity of his portrayal of life on the sugar cane plantations and among the lower-class blacks in the urban Fort de France, in the shadow of the wealthy (and white) property owners. Palcy's task, then was to translate this fidelity and sensitivity to the screen—that is, to decide what to emphasize, what to omit, and what to change. According to Gerald Mast in his essay "Literature and Film:" "A film adaptation of an important literary work has an obligation to be faithful to the spirit (or, even, the letter) of the original text and, at the same time, to be a cogent and unified work in its own terms."[4]

We are told[5] that Palcy discovered the novel when she was 14 years old (around 1970), and that she wrote her first script based on it at the age of 17 when she went to work for the Radio Télévision Française office in Fort de France. Palcy is quoted as saying: "In my mind, it was urgent to make a movie of this story . . . Zobel's book was a great revelation and shock because all our books were about France. It was the first time I read a book written by a black man of our country about the fruits of our country." By her own admission, then, the director approached her task with a sense of urgency. One, it can be safely assumed, that was aimed more at the overall education of

her fellow Martiniquians and others, than at the unpredictability of box-office success. This brings us back to the question of film as statement, or, more explicitly, as an expression of artistic commitment.

On the subject of the treatment of Africans, for example, Palcy has stated that when she first went to Paris she was shocked by the state of their relations with the Parisians. "After slavery was abolished in the West Indies, the government broke all relations with Africa as if they wanted to forget they were from African slaves . . . I know Africa only from films that Aimé Césaire arranged to have shown in Martinique," said Palcy. Her sympathetic portrayal of the elder African Médouze, like Zobel's, reflects the director's attempt to reach out to present-day Africans, and to bridge the gap. "If Médouze exists in the film," she has said, "that was my way to say 'Africa, hello! Africa, we didn't forget you.'"

By and large, Palcy has remained faithful to the spirit of Zobel's original, even to the point of reproducing snatches of dialogue that sound like verbatim liftings from the novel. Her scenes of the children's mischief while their parents and guardians are off working in the cane fields; with old Médouze teaching the boy José about riddles and life across the seas in Africa; with the plantation workers disputing their abysmally low wages in return for the toiling and moiling they had to do in the cane fields; and with the children being drilled in their catechism before First Communion. All of these scenes, and many others, have an air of Zobel-like authenticity—the director complementing the novelist.

Palcy captures to perfection the importance of education in the lives of these plantation youngsters. It is their only way out of a seemingly hopeless situation. So we share M'Man Tine's disappointment when her grandson José is only awarded a partial scholarship to attend school in Fort de France, but applaud her resolve when she decides to do whatever it takes to ensure that he goes. In one scene Palcy's camera dwells on the teacher's enthralled expression as José displays his skill at word usage, and we share the pride filling the teacher's heart. Zobel had made the quest for education the focal point of most of the novel, and Palcy, by highlighting this focus, does the novelist full justice.

Darling Legitimus and Garry Cadenat in ***Sugar Cane Alley***

Naturally, the director displayed her own creativity through the artistic liberties taken with the text of the novel. In some cases, it appears, the innovations had more to do with practical demands than with a search for artistic fidelity. Primary of these is the "killing off" of José's mother, Délia, who in the novel, works as a maid in Fort de France. When José's friends break M'Man Tine's favorite bowl in their search for the sugar that they believe to be hidden somewhere in the shack—no sugar on a sugar cane plantation?—we learn that this deed is all the more reprehensible because the bowl represented a close link between the grandmother and her dead daughter. Palcy thus economizes on one potentially major character, and as a result was the grandmother, outstandingly played by Darling Légitimus, to take over Délia's role in Fort de France. The integrity of the adaptation is not severely compromised. Since Délia is not really missed, and M'Man Tine comes across all the stronger for this extension of her role.

Economy, plus a feeling for those events or episodes that were of most significance to her audience, occasioned Palcy's introduction of a character such as Léopold, José's mulatto friend, a composite of several Zobel characters. In one episode in the novel, told almost *en passant* by José and M'Man Tine's friend Carmen to explain why he was sleeping with so many of the *béké*'s (locally-born Caucasians) women, an unnamed youth is being refused the name of his white father. Even on his deathbed the man proclaims: "It is not a name for mulattoes." For the film Palcy embroiders on this episode, shaping it into something larger by making Léopold this unfortunate mulatto—and allowing her camera to do the rest. She thereby puts into sharper perspective the deep racial division so prevalent in West Indian so-

cieties, one which they are ever-willing to pretend does not exist.

Palcy also economizes in the film by restricting the time span of the action. Whereas the novel follows José over a period of some ten years, the film revolves around the boy at the age of eleven (thus saving in the process the trouble of having to "age" the young Garry Cadenat, who plays José with a promising degree of professionalism. In the final analysis, these changes matter little, since the spirit of Zebel's novel remains. For instance, Carmen's dreams of Hollywood, a Palcy innovation, is not too unlikely a scenario. Since it provides an even stronger motivation for Carmen to allow the younger José to tutor him; keeping close to Zobel's own powerful attraction to the cinema as shown in the novel.

Another one of Palcy's refreshing innovations is the liberal use of *créole*, whereas none was used in the novel. It is understandable that Zobel even wrote his dialogues in standards French. But, as I have stated in the introduction to the novel's English translation: "Most French West Indians have another language beside standard French—*créole*. In fact, for many this is the only language. *Créole* is widespread precisely among the class of people with which Zobel deals."[6] It is clearly better to opt for the authenticity afforded by the characters speaking the language that comes most spontaneously, than to force them to "dress up" their language, and come across as stilted or false. Instead, *Sugar Cane Alley* was subtitled in standard French—a technique used quite effectively in *The Harder They Come*, where Jamaican *creole* was subtitled in standard English. In this regard, then, Palcy went one step further than the novelist, completing what he probably felt precluded from doing during that particular period of socio-political history.

Palcy achieves an overall effect of simplicity and charm. Many reviewers, quite justifiably, used words like "touching" and "moving" to describe the film. The two recognized professional actors, Darling Légitimus, and Douta Seck, Césaire's original Christophe in the play *La Tragédie du Roi Christophe (The Tragedy of King Christopher)* as Médouze, join with newcomer Gary Cadenat and a huge cast of islanders to produce a film that captures the essence of the plantation lifestyle, without wallowing in the overly exotic. One North American critic, clearly caught up in the tourist-oriented view of the "islands," found Palcy's use of sepia tones "a mistake for a movie trying to capture the life of a Caribbean island, where strong, bright colors are bound to be part of anyone's experience and memory." This critic no doubt missed, or disregarded the connection with the snapshots of the period that opens the film. On the other hand, some have praised this technique for the air of retrospect it provides, thereby ensuring its charm, as well as its effect on countering the stereotyped image that many have of the West Indies.

Sugar Cane Alley has been successful in many places, playing to receptive audiences and critical acclaim in major cities of France, Canada, and the United States, and to enthusiastic and record-breaking crowds in Martinique. Palcy won the Silver Lion at the Venice Film Festival and a *Caesar* in France for best first film, and Darling Légitimus received the award for best actress in Venice. All of this should suffice to show that even with a relatively limited budget—approximately $US 800,000, we are told—to adapt our classics to the screen in a manner that does both the written work and the film justice. One wonders, though, how a West Indian film festival, with West Indian judges, would have responded to *Sugar Cane Alley*. One suspects that non-West Indian audiences react to the film for reasons that are not quite the same as those motivating their counterparts in Martinique. Whereas the non-West Indian may look for an image of exoticism, the West Indian looks for realistic portrayals. Palcy must have thought about this duality of pitch. In other words, for which audience was she filming? To further complicate matters, the film received international recognition and blessing. Alain Ménil has commented on what may have been a change in reaction due to this success: "... the perception of the film would of necessity be changed by this official recognition. The Metropolitan viewer goes to see a film that is now authenticated by international acclaim, one that has made its mark. In the end, this viewer is no longer part of a homogenous community, to which the film had been destined, but is necessarily taken up with different preoccupations: as a West Indian, he goes to see an image of a time and a place he has probably never known; as a Frenchman, he simply discovers a universe unknown in all respects, and foreign to his being. One cannot erase this duality from one's analysis of the film."

Obviously, outside of the West Indies—except among West Indian exiles and their descendants—the element of identification is missing. However, the film struck a very responsive chord among Martiniquians precisely because so many people recognized themselves in the portrayals. One elderly man, Palcy relates, felt he was seeing his life on film and pronounced himself ready to "die happy." If such a reaction seems exaggerated, it must perforce be seen in the light of the empassioned relation between film image and viewer that we first spoke of in this paper—occasioned by what is perceived by West Indians as the lack of opportunity to see oneself as a serious participant in the entire cinematic process.

Does self-recognition guarantee success in the West Indies? Apparently not, if we are to judge by the reported failure of Christine Lara's *Adieu Foulards*, another West Indian film that was released shortly after *Sugar Cane*

Euzhan Palcy, director

Alley. According to the Martiniquan scholar Alain Ménil, this failure stemmed from the fact that the self-recognition was nothing more than a continuation of the same foreign-based view of the West Indies that had caused so many problems in the first place.[8] The accolades showered on *Sugar Cane Alley* have so far been heavily foreign-based--that is, from critics outside of Martinique and the West Indies. In the West Indies we have been led to believe that success before a supposedly unbiased non-West Indian audiences confirms the overall artistic appeal and basic soundness of a work. On the other hand, success before a local audience—while confirming the fact that the artist has made a sufficient impact—comes with the nagging feeling and suspicion that the response is based more on audience emotion and familiarity with parties and events than with the attendant critical scrutiny. We West Indians therefore have to call into action all our intellectual honesty to fight this untenable situation.

One can only hope that a film such as *Sugar Cane Alley*, after its initial success, does not pass into the realm of the brilliant but forgotten, and that it serves as a catalyst for the production of others based, loosely or otherwise, on the outstanding written works our authors have produced. We can dream, perhaps, of seeing a film version of *A House for Mr. Biswas* or of *La Tragédie du Roi Christophe* as part of what could some day be called the West Indian cinema. Such a cinema, ideally, would seek to correct the state of affairs which foists upon impressionable audiences films that, according to the Gambian literature and film scholar Mbye Cham, "tend to be of the most alienating type: colonial propaganda productions that extol, justify and glorify the virtues and magnanimity of the so-called European 'civilizing mission' "; American 'B' movies concerning cops and robbers, cowboy and Indian Westerns and war extravaganzas; escapist James Bond spectacles; 'Spaghetti Westerns'; Indian romance fantasies and, lately, Bruce Lee karate and other Kung-Fu packages from Hong Kong, and so-called blaxploitation films."[9] West Indian cinema must become as real as West Indian literature. With unflinching tenacity, it must translate and interpret what our artists are saying to the West Indian society in particular, and the rest of the world in general. The audience is already there, willing and receptive, if not yet very critical. The technology and the various filmmaking talents, as Euzhan Palcy demonstrates so creditably, are also available. What, one wonders, are we waiting for?

NOTES

[1]I am aware that the film was presented at the 1983 Bombay Film Festival as *Black Shack Alley*, under which title appeared my translation of the novel in 1980 (Washington: Three Continents Press, and London: Heinemann Educational Books). The English subtitles on the film also use the phrase "Black Shack Alley" whenever the narrator talks of "rue cases-nègres." This leads me to believe that the American distributor sought a more catchy or marketable title.

[2]Zobel, Joseph, *Black Shack Alley*, p. 168.

[3]Lieber, Michael, *Street Life: Afro-American Culture in Urban Trinidad*, Boston: G. K. Hall/Cambridge: Schenkman Publishing Co., 1981, p. 95.

[4]Mast, Gerald, "Literature and Film," in Barricelli and Gibaldi, eds., *Interrelations of Literature*, New York: MLA, 1982, p. 280.

[5]I have culled much of this information from the many interviews Palcy gave to the press as a result of the success of *Sugar Cane Alley* in the United States.

[6]Zobel, *Black Shack Alley*, p. xxi.

[7]Ménil, Alain, " 'Rue Cases-Nègres' ou les Antilles de l'Intérieur," *Présence Africaine* 129, 1st Quarter, 1984:97.

[8]Ménil, p. 100.

[9]Mbye Cham, "Art and Ideology in The Work of Sembene Ousmane and Haile Gerima," *Présence Africaine* 129, 1st Quarter, 1984:89.

This article is from a forthcoming publication in homage to William Mailer, U.W.I., Jamaica.

Keith Q. Warner is a professor at Howard University in the Department of Romance Languages.

Blacks Britannica: A Film Review and Sociological Analysis

by Juanita R. Howard

This paper was prepared for and delivered at the **Journey Across Three Continents** film festival which was held at the New Community Cinema in Huntington, Long Island, on May 31, 1984.

Blacks Britannica, produced by Musindo Mwinyipembe and David Koff brings to us the ever-continuing manifestation and effects of white racism, overt and covert. The pervasive and special sub-textual pulse communicated by the film, however, is the near-inescapability of the muted, tormenting impotence of blacks; the terrible virulence of white racism as it targets blacks in the smallest particulars of their lives, and in the smallest corners of whichever continent on which they are found.

Blacks Britannica primarily examines first-generation blacks in England. These children of immigrants from the colonies find themselves overtly and intentionally denied all opportunities that are routinely available to British citizens, and therefore to which they thought they were entitled as British citizens themselves. For example, Britain's blacks have been excluded from adequate employment, an equal chance for earned and deserved upward mobility, equal educational opportunities, decent housing, basic legal justice, political involvement, and personal dignity. For over forty years industrious blacks in Britain have been attempting to secure these benefits with little or no group success. The film communicates that the experience of the contemporary black generation is therefore the result of years of neglect by British society, which has avoided even the obvious signs of increasing hostility directed toward the black presence in Britain.

Blacks Britannica opens with a very quiet scene of whites playing tennis and provocatively juxtaposes the serenity of that scene with a group of West Indian musicians, wearing their hair in dreadlock style, in a recording studio where they are singing about the revolution. The scene then shifts to a white policeman, stoically watching the participants of a protest march. The scenes continue to be contrasts between serenity in white neighborhoods and chaos in black neighborhoods. A young Rastafarian expresses his frustration when he says "society is drowning us. . . there is a conspiracy against blacks. . . ." Various persons are then interviewed and each tells a part of their own individual story that led to their plight. Again and again each expresses anger, frustration, and concern about the suffocating effects of oppression and racism.

The following is a very brief socio-historical recapitulation of events which occurred in Britain from the 1950's to the 1980's—events which essentially are graphically analyzed and debated in the film *Blacks Britannica*. The articles cited represent only a small sampling of the numerous studies that examine the development and rise of racial diversification that has taken place in Britain during those decades—and its effect on the socio-eco-political aspects of the country.

Life Magazine in 1958 reported that during the late 1940's approximately 200,000 non-whites from British colonies in the West Indies, Pakistan, Africa and India migrated to Britain. They were essentially employed in very menial jobs—basically unskilled labor. That was a period of full employment for "native" Britains and there was little apparent overt racial hostility. Blacks were nonetheless commonly referred to as "spades."

When economic recession came to Britain, in the late 1950's, blacks were subject to the "LIFO" phenomenon (last in, first out) so historically peculiar to America. As interviewee Wilbur Mitchell said in the 1978 American documentary, *I Remember Harlem*, when the depression of the 1930's hit America, whites began fighting blacks

for the jobs they were holding—menial jobs that whites had previously not wanted and considered "nigger work."

It was during Britain's economic recession of the 1950's that open hostility against blacks was unequivocally expressed. Primary among the respectable quarters from which these open attacks increasingly came was Sir Oswald Mosley, described as a fascist and admirer of Adolf Hitler. Several violent street incidents occurred. The Notting Hill slum's riot, for example, where "fighting continued for four consecutive nights with fists, knives, bicycle chains, axes and Molotov cocktails" (*Life*, p. 29). This and other such incidents prompted British citizens to call for immigration restrictions against non-whites. Posters were seen capsulizing group attitudes: "protect your jobs, housing for white people" "a square deal for the Negro in his own country" (p. 29).

Ironically, it was also during the late 1950's that blacks on the American continent were stepping up their continuing 300-year struggle for equality in the Little Rock, Arkansas school desegregation case, the Montgomery bus boycott, and the courageous initiatives of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. At approximately the same time as the Notting Hill riot and other incidents in Britain, *Life* magazine also published an article and photographs in 1958 showing Reverend King being manhandled in a Montgomery, Alabama police station, and a sign on the side of a car in which four young white males were sitting which read, "Chicken whites go to school with jigs" (p. 30).

In the 1960's, Britain found itself responding to the "race problem"—the same way Americans had done 60 years earlier—with the development of a British-type Ku Klux Klan (KKK). As in America, such organizations arose in the areas hardest hit by unemployment and where resentment against colored immigrants runs deepest.

Blacks Britannica

United States News and World Report indicated in a 1965 article that the development of the British KKK was only a symptom of this white backlash (p. 30). In fact, in 30 industrial cities where colored immigrants were concentrated, other race-oriented organizations were also being organized. Among the differences between the American KKK and the British KKK is that the latter's membership was not secret. They strove to be very visible, to appear on television, radio, and in newspapers. Their declared intent was to wear the KKK letters on the sleeves of specially-made blazers. Their goal was to have a "racially pure" Britain, immediate expulsion of Britain's 800,000 colored immigrants and a permanent ban on further colored immigration." (p. 31).

C. Broogan reported in an article in the *National Review* (1965) that in the crowded slum neighborhoods (where working class blacks are forced to live), there is "a direct correlation between intolerance on one hand and ignorance and narrow experiences on the other." When asked about non-whites in the country, a young white woman replied, "I don't like foreigners . . . any foreigners because . . . they're foreign." Whites felt there was "reverse discrimination"—usually meaning, in actuality, that blacks were being considered equitably. Black women living in severely overcrowded housing, for example, were said to be receiving preferential treatment in the distribution of beds in maternity wards. Black children were thought to be unfairly enrolled in nurseries wherever they were in greater numbers than white children

An anti-black tactic familiarly employed in America surfaced in some British towns—that is, the use of "restrictive covenants." This technique, in which neighbors signed an agreement to prohibit the sale of their homes to non-whites, was attempted in America but found to be unconstitutional by the United States Supreme Court.

Other "backlash" activities reported included job discrimination, to which

"immigrant" workers responded with strikes. The British Labor Party reversed its stand against immigration restrictions and under the then-Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, recommended tightening immigration controls. Also, under Wilson's administration, legislation restructing discrimination in employment and housing was dropped.

In response to activities of the National Front, the KKK and the increasingly overt racist attitudes toward blacks, some white Britons formed organizations to discuss what they perceived to be "new social problems" resulting from colored immigration policies. Blacks in Britain also began organizing. For example, a chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was founded after Reverend King visited Britain. In addition the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination (CARD) attempted to secure civil rights legislation.

It is further pointed out in *Blacks Britannica* that the contemporary black community has organized special Saturday schools in an effort to develop a sense of blackness in the children. Community bookstores also carry African art and music to supplement the traditional public school curriculum with "black studies" information—this signified a marked change in the attitudes of Britain's blacks, who had previously followed the road of assimilation.

In E. Scobie's 1972 *Ebony Magazine* review of the developing anti-black attitudes in Britain, he pointed out that by the end of 1969, it appeared that the only alternatives for blacks were "integration, assimilation, separation or repatriation." Blacks who had migrated to England during the 1940's and 1950's thought assimilation was the only answer.

Scobie found that blacks attempted to assimilate British norms, principally by adopting British language, food, and dress. Many Africans denied their heritage, and when shown films of Africans, laughed derisively in reflex against the embarrassment of their color. Writers from the West Indies and other Carribbean areas identified completely with England, and rejected identification as "West Indian writers." Ironically, American writers like Roi Ottley, who visited England, observed that there was formidable resistance to the literary recognition of black men. Sensibly enough, Martinique-born poet-politician, Aime Cesare, predicted that blacks who were attempting to assimilate would, after finding themselves rejected by the British, return to their original culture for stability and a sense of identity.

"Aimé Césare predicted that blacks who were attempting to assimilate would, after finding themselves rejected by the British, return to their original culture for stability and a sense of identity."

U.S. News and World Report (1975) found that any effort at assimilation would be a futile one. As the 1970's advanced, young black Britains found themselves locked in a vise of discrimination and disadvantage. British statistics revealed that in 1975, "of 21,000 policemen, approximately 40 were non-white. There were no Asians or blacks in the Labor Cabinet, and none among 630 members of the House of Commons" (p. 66). In addition, "factory foremen are almost invariably white, even in plants where white workers are in a minority" (p. 65). This was also the case in America, during the 1940's and 1950's, where even in government agencies that employed only blacks, all of the supervisors were white. Additional statistics revealed that "between November 1973 and May 1975, unemployment in Britain as a whole rose by 65%, but among colored workers, it jumped 165%" (p. 65). Many reasons have been presented for the disparity in these figures, but the only clear conclusion is that non-white workers were badly in need of jobs in 1975.

These statistics and sociological overview make clear the unmistakable British intention of maintaining non-whites as permanent immigrants in a country that was allegedly their "mother country." As mentioned above, the first generation of colored born in Britain suffered severely from the "invisible man" syndrome—the allusion made indelible by writer Ralph Ellison. Britain attempted to minimize the true depth and breadth of anti-black sentiment until it was too late—that is, until the violence escalated. And the new black generation found it impossible to accept the assimilationist or "Black Briton" philosophy of their parents. This generation, in turn, is experiencing more severe forms of discrimination, the intensity of which is often alarming.

By 1977, when *Blacks Britannica* was being filmed, statistics revealed that 80% of black youth 16 to 19 years of age were unable to find work. Many had turned to street crime believing that they had the right to "take or capture what was theirs." For them, these activities were politically motivated.

A. Silk, in a 1976 Christmas Day issue of *Nation* found these discouraged youth telling their leaders, "You are nothing more than a village chief . . . you don't understand how the country works." (p. 686). At the same time for many of these same young West Indians, there is a pervasive confusion about what they should do on a day-to-day basis, and how they can effect change in the long run. They feel demoralized but prepared to fight the racism that is oppressing them. They realize that they are not going back to the countries of their racial origin and must take a stand in Britain.

British papers were also reporting on the violence that was escalating in the streets of Britain. In *Commonweal*'s September 16, 1977 issue, Wicker examined the role of the National Front in exacerbating the already negative race relations in Britain. According to Wicker, "The British public tends to blame the government for everything that goes wrong, and to expect it to do everything which is necessary to put things right. Hence the apathy on which facism breeds."

It is against this historical and sociological background—and at the height of ideological and physical violence—that *Blacks Britannica* places its focus. The direction and editing of the film juxtaposes white and black Britain through contemporary and vintage film footage and personal interviews.

Musindo has lived in Britain and experienced much of what has been discussed in this paper. In an interview with *Essence* magazine (1980), Musindo indicated that the film was "created to illustrate the racial discrimination against Britain's four percent non-white population, also the growing militance" (p. 10). It was understood that "the film would not embody objective journalism" (p. 10). This is obvious in that it is primarily the people interviewed, old film footage and newsreels of contemporary events, that tell the history of Britain over four decades.

This information is analyzed by various individuals without any additional narration. Thus, the sequential data comprising the structure of the film's information are essentially the subjective perceptions of the interviewees. This offers the viewers a cross-section of both non-white and white perspectives.

Musindo Mwinyipembe and David Koff were commissioned by WGBH, Boston's public television station, to produce the film as a part of its "World" series. *Blacks Britannica* was re-edited for the American television audience by the executive producer of "World," although it was vehemently contested by the filmmakers.

After legal action was taken to insure the film's original integrity, *Blacks Britannica* has been shown internationally. As Koff stated in *Cineaste*, "we were trying to make a film about a class, about a historical moment, not about a particular typical family, as in the ordinary case, or about a particular prison, or a little section of what was going on . . . Indeed, we [he and Ms. Mwinyipembe] wanted to make a film that would be useful . . . in the struggle against racism."

Juanita R. Howard is an associate professor of sociology at the City University of New York, Baruch College.

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Africa, The Last Cinema

by Clyde Taylor

Of the more than ninety nations that gained independence after World War II, most of the African nations among them date their independence from 1960. The furling of the flags of European nations coincides with the exposure of the first films made by black African nations. In the decades since the African cinema has painfully stretched away from the cramped restrictions of the past and the persisting mechanics of domination—and undertaken the tense examination of decolonization.

The meaning of cinema for pre-independence Africans and moviegoers today is captured in a character sketched by Ousmane Sembene: "She lived in a kind of separate world; the reading she did, the films she saw, made her part of a universe in which her own people had no place, and by the same token, she no longer had a place in theirs." Commercial narrative fantasies had intimated the "lack of civilization" of her own people. "When N'Deye came out of a theater where she had seen visions of mountain chalets deep in snow, of beaches where the great of the world lay in the sun, of cities where the nights flashed with many-colored lights, and walked from this world back into her own, she would be seized with a kind of nausea, a mixture of hate and shame." Through the education of colonial schools and such movie theaters, she "knew far more about Europe than she did about Africa."

Africa's experience with motion pictures for six decades had been one of existential distress. The relation of blacks in Africa to this magical instrument was one of a people locked into colonial silence, for a term far longer than any comparable population. They were forced to watch in fascination worlds severely different than the ones they knew, even when the films were putatively about their homeland; in which successions of Trader Horns and Tarzans cavorted among them with glamorized animation, all the more to signify their own irreality. African intellectuals were pained to watch Paul Robeson, whom they ultimately knew as a champion of liberated art and liberated Africa, betrayed by devious direction into the ignominy of *Sanders of the River* (1935). As Bosambo (son of Sambo?), the camera frames Robeson shuffling and grinning obsequiously to "Sandi," the representative of the English crown, who alone is able to restore order out of chaotic rebellion and install him as king of the river people.

Today's African filmmakers—who watched *Sanders* and the like as youths—have evolved in a steadily shifting cinematic environment. This has mainly been a shift from colonialism to neo-colonialism, or from direct domination by Europe to indirect domination by Europe and the United States. For at the same time, America has become a superpower in the world of film, as well as in global politics. Africa stands today at the other end of the spectrum from Hollywood. If Americans view cinema from the center of profitable, monopolistic production and distribution, Africa is a laboratory for the study of film's relation to society from the vantagepoint of the exploited.

Because post-war Hollywood began to depend on foreign distribution for more than half its profits, it muted the gross caricatures of foreign people that were routine in earlier times. In the 1950's, the Motion Picture Producers Association (MPPA) began to systematically preview scripts in order to filter out the most offensive materials. Thus the most recent television episodes of Tarzan now transpire in some anonymous, tropical native-land, populated by vaguely equatorial people. But the results of these modulations have been limited. According to a 1968 study cited in *Africa on Film and Videotape 1960-1981*, "More twelfth graders (percentage in parentheses) than seventh graders assigned the following stereotypical terms to Africa: witch doctors (93%), wild animals (91%), drums (91%), spears (90%), savages (88%), tribe (88%), natives (86%), cannibals (85%), pygmies (84%), poison darts (82%), naked (78%), huts (69%), superstition (69%), primitive (69%), missionaries (52%), strange (44%), backward (43%), illiterate (42%), no history (38%)." A reasonable explanation of the variance between seventh and twelfth grades is the cumulative impact of television and movie-watching.

Far more important to African filmmakers were the shifts in the control of production and distribution, that provided little relief for their aspirations. It is the realization that political and cinematic independence are closely linked that gives emerging African cinema a highly charged political ambience. The number of films produced

by colonized nations all over the world has been negligible (Hong Kong being a special exception). But those who set out to frame authentic African images after the flag-lowering ceremonies that signalled independence, soon found that the necessary material resources were almost entirely out of African hands, and were organized to resist the growth of indigenous film industries.

The importation of foreign films is controlled by American distribution cartels. The French example is a good illustration of their power. When independence came, two French companies, SECMA and COMACIO, dominated Francophone distribution through a dual monopoly. They dealt with African theater owners on an all or nothing basis, allowing them no choice in selecting films. These have been traditionally the trashiest of movies—failed films seldom seen in the metropolitan countries. Consequently, African film production is discouraged because monopolistic distributors can "dump" films made elsewhere at rentals far lower than domestic films could afford to charge.

Burkina Faso moved against this one-sided situation in 1970 by nationalizing its cinemas. The French conglomerate immediately imposed a boycott, closing down its theaters. A valiant effort to secure films from other sources did not fill the gap and a compromise was struck, leaving film selection effectively still in the hands of the French companies. Other efforts to nationalize distribution have met with similar results, with the exception of Guinea which, under a Marxist-Leninist government, was able to successfully withstand the monopolies.

The lopsided film picture in sub-Saharan Africa today is evident in the production of less than a dozen African features per year, while in 1976 Tanzania imported 160 features, Kenya 219, Senegal 248 and Uganda 936. In 1979, according to the *United Nations Statistical Yearbook*, Nigeria imported 105 features, all of them from the United States.

The African film market is small by western standards. Which is not the same as saying it is unimportant. In societies where literacy rates are low and where several languages coexist within national borders, the communications potential of cinema, for informational and intellectual development, are compelling. Ousmane Sembene sees cinema as "the night school of my people." The role that films could play in developing a sense of national identity —where such identity is now fragile— equals the place once held by epics in the oral tradition. And while this is a secondary consideration to most African directors, the production and world-wide distribution of African films promises a needed enrichment of human culture.

"Cinema is a conversation I hold with my people," says Sembene. Many African film artists see film as such a conversation through which fundamental questions may be settled. Some recent feature films obviously bid for commercial success, but the overwhelming preoccupations of African cineastes are marked by a sincerity, dedication, and commitment that draws their works into the considerations of art and social thought, and away from the entertainment-for-profit that is the dominant concern of the major film powers. Moreover, the communal role of art in traditional Africa—combined with the critical pressure of the public's realities socio-economic and political—mean that the space usually occupied by *artistic* and *intellectual* cinema is dominated by films invested with *cultural* and *political* awareness. To be both African and a filmmaker is to be cut off from the usual grounds of complacency. The dialogue that is wanted with an African audience—which might begin with the question, what does it mean to be an African in these times —is crudely interrupted by the clanking machinery of imported white male adventure thrillers, kung fu operas from Hong Kong, and convoluted Indian melodramas which hold African audiences in prolonged captivity.

Thus, Africa's has been a "cinema of hunger"—an accurate enough description of its poverty of material resources. Some American film school departments have more available technical equipment than most African countries. Film stock has been rare, unselected, and often defective. Most West African films are processed and finished in European laboratories. By the time the director is able to view the developed footage, the production team can seldom be reassembled for retakes. The ratio of footage exposed to footage used in the final print often approaches 1:1. There are few trained African actors or technicians. Electricity is not always available.

Magaye Niang (L) and Mareme Niange in ***Touki Bouki***

Thus the environment for making films with any accountability to local reality is severely constrained. Though African filmmakers, for the most part, understand the pressures ranged against them, it must often seem as though nobody wants the truths that their films would willingly bring. Leaders of African governments are wary of the kind of critical inquiry into national conditions that is likely to be stimulated by the filmmaker. The economic weaknesses of the continent—problems of drought, famine, disease, ignorance, wars and inter-ethnic conflicts—make the filmmakers' bid for scanty resources seem impudent.

To this position, the filmmaker can make two cogent replies. First, that the resources needed are already present in the sums Africans spend to see mind-wasting imported films. And second, that the perspectives brought by his film can have an impact on drought, famine, disease, ignorance and the rest by clarifying their causes and solutions. But an African elite that mainly sees its salvation in its ties to the economic and political systems of the West, is largely indifferent to these arguments. The cognitive grid of internationalized, Hollywood stereotypes, in which Africans are doomed to dependence or failure, continually reinforces the inertia that keeps African audiences, elites, western societies, in short, "the world," skeptical about an independent-thinking and independently creative African cinema.

The environment for African cinema remains one, then, that embodies a conflict surrounding both material and mental resources. Equally clear is that the exacting evolution of African cinema is inseparable from the contexts of African political, economic and psychological realities—from movements for change as well as complexes of subordination, underdevelopment and inertia. The remarkable achievement of African cinema—a body of films defying in scope and talents its material handicaps—is no isolated "miracle," but a concrete reflection of energies bent towards decolonization and repossession in all areas of African life.

A beginning of sorts for African cinema occurred in 1955 when a group of African students, Paulin Vieyra, Mamadou Saar, Robert Cristan and Jacques Melo Kame, completed a short film in Paris, *Afrique sur Seine* (*Africa on the Seine*). It is characterized by long takes of young African men walking thoughtfully along the boulevards of Paris in scenes suggesting existentialist alienation and a cinema technique influenced by Italian neo-realism.

A deeper grip on a foundation for the future was felt in 1963 when *Borom Sarret*, by Ousmane Sembene of Senegal, was noted on the international film scene and won a prize at the International Festival of Tours in France. This short film, which follows a poor driver whose cart is confiscated when he crosses the boundary into the European quarter of Dakar, has many marks of the African cinema to follow. Also touched by neo-realism, *Borom Sarret* carries a smouldering reflection on life and death as the driver transports a dead child to a cemetary, and later a pregnant woman to a hospital. Its open-endedness and barely-contained anger prefigure the particular power Sembene would continue to draw out of the most ordinary African spectacles.

When he completed his next film, *La Noire de . . . Black Girl* (1966), the cinema of black Africa had been incontrovertibly launched. It was the first feature-length film completed south of the Sahara.

"South of the Sahara" is an important but problematic distinction. Most references here and otherwise to "African cinema" are directed towards sub-Saharan or black African films. The term is also made to relate to films whose intentions are essentially African in spirit, which opens the definition to certain films and movements of North Africa and Egypt. Egyptian director

Love Brewed in an African Pot

Sambizanga

Youssef Chahine considers himself emphatically an African filmmaker. "African" is the adjective that assembles the term "Third World cinema." But technically, all films made by natives of the continent qualify as African, which includes the forty odd films produced each year in Egypt, films noted for their employment of fabulously glamourous stars, sensational plots laced with musical interludes and a decidedly commercial orientation.

So yet other beginnings must be accounted for. A precedent that went unheeded was the 1924 *Gazelle's Eyes* (Ain El Ghazel), shot in Tunisia by Shemama Chiby—a film described by Taher Cherraa as having "no success and no sequel," since three decades would pass before the production of another Tunisian feature. *Laila* (1927), on the other hand, generally regarded as the first Egyptian feature, was quickly followed by several others.

To place the major themes, directors and films of African cinema, it is good to recall a schema proposed by Frantz Fanon at the dawn of African independence. Fanon viewed the "native intellectual" as transversing three phases: (1) an assimilationist phase, during which the intellectual remains a passive pet of the colonizers; (2) a phase of remembrance, where the intellectual makes a rather abstract and synthetic rediscovery of his roots in national culture; and (3) a combative phase wholly immersed in liberationist struggle, where literature becomes the songs of battle.

Adapting these three phases to African cinema, film theorist Teshome Gabriel identifies the first with the imitation of Hollywood film style and substance; the second with a struggle over cultural identity; and the third with a cinema in which films and other art forms are explicitly acknowledged as ideology.

The second phase dominates our attention here, as it is within the realm of the post-independence, neocolonial circumstances that most noted African films are made. It is a central, pivotal zone that contains elements of the other two phases in a tense, uneasy equilibrium, where contradictions and frustrations are most apparent.

Appropriately, this center phase provides the scenario for the dominating theme of African cinema: the conflict between old and new. This is never a conflict between symmetrical opposites, but rather the choice from among the modern, individualistic and industrialized; Marxist socialism; and some form of African socialism. How does one separate those older African values of solid worth from regressive elements in African tradition—and both from the cultural destabilizations of colonialism?

Not surprisingly, these themes percolate in the work of Ousmane Sembene, perhaps the best known African film director, who is legitimately considered one of the century's major artists. Sembene was a dock worker in France when he taught himself to write fiction. *God's Bits of Wood*, his second novel, is a masterpiece of African and world literature. Yet he turned almost immediately from this success toward film, realizing that the political awakening of his people—his chosen vocation—would be better served by film than fiction in Senegal where the majority are unlettered.

While all of Sembene's films have been warmly received in Senegal and abroad (except *Ceddo*, which is banned in his own country), admirers are evenly divided over their favorites. The power of his filmic art was somewhat muted in his first three features to accommodate western viewers—for whom his subtle Marxist dialectic and layered significances are lost to the restraint of his cinematic style, stationary camera, infrequent close-ups, long silences and deliberate, ritualistic pacing. Like his literary style, Sembene's film technique builds on an immanent realism, where the surface of everyday, prosaic reality is simultaneously the scene of less obvious resonances, metaphors and symbols. Teshome Gabriel likens it to the lost wax method of making African gold sculpture.

The same evidence of immanent symbolic riches as it breaks through the unsuspecting plane of surface reality, holds true for Sembene's work as a whole. Semben's conviction that African women remain unacknowledged as keepers of African tradition and the more progressive force towards African liberation is more boldly voiced in each succesive film. For these reasons,

"'Cinema is a conversation I hold with my people,' says Sembene . . ."

The collision between old and new shows up frequently in films that follow the protagonist's journey from rural village to urban tangle, or from Africa to Europe. In both journeys, the physical intimates a spiritual passage. The role of traditional versus modern medicine poses another conflict between new and old. This theme is notably addressed in Ababacar Samb Makharam's *Koudou* (Senegal, 1970), which focusses on a young woman—emotionally troubled over the ordeal of ritual scarification—who is treated without success by western psychotherapists, and finally receives solace through traditional healing practices.

Frequently in African films, women who respect the old ways are juxtaposed beside those attracted to western aesthetics, morals, and consumerism. But this paradigm coexists with films that provide a new examination of old social attitudes, as when chauvinist males limit women's freedom, or when old caste and class barriers stand in the way of young lovers and wider social harmony.

N'Jangaan

Ceddo forms a kind of paradigm of the definitive elements of Sembene's work in cinema.

The path of Med Hondo (Mohamed Abid Hondo of Mauritania) into cinema has some parallels to Sembene's. Like Sembene, he discovered his creative vocation in France. After working as a jack of all trades, including docker, Hondo became an actor. In 1966 he formed his own group called Shango, in Paris to present plays of the black diaspora. Moved by the French indifference to his theater productions as well as the small chance of reaching black audiences, he widened his scope to include films. But unlike Sembene, Hondo remained an expatriate in France.

The deep sense of estrangement and alienation that Hondo experienced in France has been the driving energy behind his films. Through his Marxist dialectic, he describes that estrangement as merely the flip side to the severance of Africa from its own values under imperialism. Hondo considers that the expression of this theme demands the search for an undominated African film language, and he has carried this search into a style more disruptive and nonlinear than Sembene's.

Hondo's first feature, *Soleil-O* (*O Sun*, 1970, named after a lament from a song of Africans transported to the West Indies), uses estrangement as both theme and technique. Its protagonist, an accountant living in France, is nameless, like the central character of Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*. The opening—a cartoon underneath the titles—shows an African who is placed in power through foreign military intervention, only to have that power reneged. This ambivalent hero—a composite of personal experiences, including some of Hondo's—moves through a succession of episodes more modular and metaphoric than sequential and representational. The many frameworks of his appearances: with the broom of a Parisian street sweeper, in a classroom, conversing with an executive about capitalism, all stress his essential alienation and ambiguous identity. He is traumatically and climactically shocked by a French family's waste of food while lunching at their country villa. Fleeing into the forest, he falls at the gnarled roots of a tree, his mind spinning with images of Third World revolutionaries, Patrice Lumumba, Che Guevara, Malcolm X, and his ears echoing machine gun fire.

According to critic Francoise Pfaff, Hondo's film style reveals the influence of the disruptive literary technique (and values) of Frantz Fanon, Leon Damas and Aime Cesaire, the militant anti-classicism of Goddard and avant garde theater—as well as African oral tradition—the precedent that Hondo most emphatically cites. These influences penetrate the documentaries he made after *Soleil-O*. *Les Bicots-Negres, Vos Voisins, (Dirty Arabs, Dirty Niggers, Your Neighbors)* (1973), exhorts at length the abusive use of North African and black African workers in France. *Nous Aurons Toute la Mort Pour Dormir (We'll Have All Death To Sleep)* (1977) follows, with sympathy, the freedom fighters of the Polisario liberation movement.

Hondo's *West Indies* (1979) is an extraordinary African film, first for its cost ($1.35 million); and then for its pictorial and dramatic spectacle. Based on a play by Daniel Boukman, a Martiniquian, it is a *magnum opus*: a cinematic opera set on a gigantic slave ship, said to have been staged in a huge, abandoned Citroen factory. This colorful music/dance epic links the past and present oppression of West Africans from their endurance first of venal African kings who sold their countrymen into slavery, and then of their modern counterpart, the elite African collaborators with French neo-colonialism.

Haile Gerima, another expatriate African, repatriated the alienation and outrage of his sojourn in America in a remarkable film, *Harvest: 3000 Years*, made in his native Ethiopia. Gerima considers himself self-taught, despite several years as a film student at the University of California in Los Angeles. Unlike Med Hondo, the films Gerima made outside Africa are usually not considered to be African cinema, but rather a part of the independent black American film movement. These include *Bush Mama*, *Child of Resistance*, *Wilmington Ten: USA 10,000* and *Ashes and Embers*.

Harvest, which has won many festival prizes, was shot in Ethiopia in a few weeks at a cost of $20,000, and had a shooting ratio of nearly 1-to-1. Using non-actors—including members of his own family—Gerima captures, as in a timeless documentary, the unchanging reality of feudal oppression. A peasant family suffers an overbearing landlord while a canny, deranged veteran declaims the injustice of the social order. The veteran finally kills the landlord who has confiscated his land while he was at war.

The commentary of Ahmed el Maanouni is worth quoting: "The peasant is doubly enslaved—by the earth and by the landowner . . . the yoke of serfdom is clearly represented by the death of the young peasant girl, carried away by the torrent while trying to save the landowner's cow from drowning . . . While the peasants go out to work the land, the landowner goes to church. The religion is from outside and an image of power like western clothing worn over traditional dress. Foreign domination is also indicated by the frequent passing of lorries along the road—technology at the same time present and yet out of reach. . . ."

Gerima's slow-paced, black and white staging transports his spectacle beyond neorealism into a timeless collective memory. The grace and elegance of the peasants' movements, the unalienated, unsentimental firmness of their love for each other, the eloquent testimony of their faces in this nearly silent film, the spirituality of their daily culture, impart to their story an antiquity of Biblical resonance. In one scene the peasant father makes a long trek up the hill to bow to the rebukes of the landlord who is seated atop with a view of his domain. In a dream sequence, a young woman and her parents are driven through the fields, yoked like oxen to a plow, a whip cracking overhead. These images are unforgettable. Such moments make *Harvest* more convincing than fact or fiction.

Yet another sort of expatriate film is *Sambizanga* (1972), made by Sara Maldoror, who was born in Paris of Guadaloupian parents. Drawn from *The Real Life of Domingos Xavier*, by Angolan novelist Luandino Vieira, it frames the beginning stages of the Angolan revolution (although actually shot in Guinea-Bissau). Maria does not know that her husband is a member of the Popular Movement For The Liberation of Angola, and when he is arrested and imprisoned by the Portuguese, she sets out on the road with her baby to find where he is, hoping her inquiries will protect him from official indifference. Important lessons are unobtrusively conveyed along the way: her husband dies of torture rather than betray his white comrade, while she is aided on her pilgrimage by a network of party members. The storming of the prison where her husband Domingos died, not shown in the film, is said to have moved the revolution to the open level of combat that led to success.

The films of Soulemane Cisse of Mali, trained in Moscow (like Sembene and Sara Maldoror), have found a form that lies somewhere between the extended parables of Sembene and the disrupting strategies of Med Hondo and Haile Gerima. His two most recent and popular films, *Baara* (*The Porter*) and *Finye* (*The Wind*), are altogether free of the cliched devices of western cinema. The stories wind naturally—and therefore surprisingly—through many lives, but sparked by idealistic young people trying to bring change to a society where inequality of wealth and poverty is protected by powerful elders.

Baara, 1979) follows an itinerant worker, much like the driver in *Borom Sarrett*, through the diverse daily rounds of Bamako. He is befriended by a fellow countryman, a young engineer who gives him a job in his factory. The owner of the factory simultaneously murders his wife for infidelity, and has the young engineer assassinated for his attempts to unionize the plant. In *Finye* (1982), two young students disturb their elders and the general peace, not only because their love crosses class lines but also because of a common fight with other students, against inequality. Their love and commitment are only strengthened by their imprisonment.

The search for a genuinely African film language remains a common pursuit of Africa's leading filmmakers. This search has already successfully borne fruit by creating films that distinctively resemble those of no other culture. It has also turned most the these filmmakers, including those already discussed, to African oral tradition as a creative matrix. This foundation has upheld films that focus on pastoral settings, village to city transitions, and explorations, however caustic, of the old ways.

Safi Faye (Senegal) opens her most recent film *Fad Jal* (1979) with the now famous words, "In Africa, an old man

Med Hondo, director

who dies is a library burned to the ground." As the narrator relates the history of his village to the young boys of his family, the events are re-enacted. Simultaneously, questions arise as to the village's relation to the state in terms of land ownership and control. Similar questions preoccupy the village elders in Faye's first feature, *Kaddu-Beykat* (*Letter From A Village*) (1976), the story of two lovers who are separated when the young man ventures to find work in the city.

"While studying African rites and customs," Faye notes, "apart from their problems of religion, people always ended up talking to me about their current problems which were, rather, ones of economics." Thus, social relevance enters her films, which have otherwise been characterized as documentary and ethnographic in form. The particular mix of elements in her films, their peaceful movement, the sensitive incorporation of ritual, make a distinctive contribution to African film grammar by the first black African woman film director.

Sey Seyeti (*One Man, Many Women*) (1980) by Ben Diogaye Beye, ties the loose interconnections of oral narrative to the problems of polygamy. Some of these befall Nder, a muslim with two wives, the younger of whom is misled by a marabout and suspects the other of causing the illness of her child. In another scramble of relationships, Fatou, who promises her lover that she will divorce the husband forced on her by her parents, announces a new day after her lover marries another and invites her to become his second wife. Ben Beye's is a witty, diverting, and thought-provoking film, regardless of how much controversy it has aroused over the treatment of a subject that demands sensitivity.

More in the nature of an expose is *N'Diangine* (Senegal, 1975) perhaps the best known film of Mahama Johnson Traore. The title refers to a Koranic schoolboy who is subjected to abuse by a corrupt marabout. The marabout profits from his students' labor while only teaching them to recite verses of scripture that they cannot read. This moving and well-coordinated study ends in the anguish of the boy's flight to the city, where he is killed by the auto of an indifferent bureaucrat.

Future discussions of oral tradition in African cinema will have to give special attention to *Jom* (Senegal, 1981), Ababacar Samb Makharam's second major film after *Koudou*. Mahkaram brings oral tradition into the foreground with a griot-narrator who articulates, sometimes directly to the camera-audience, the virtues of *jom*—a Wolof concept loosely translated as the dignity, respect and courage without which a man is not a man. Declaiming to a group of fellow striking workers fractured by dissidence, the griot makes vivid and relevant the issue of *jom* as it is illustrated by two stories re-enacted through flashbacks to the 1900's and the 1930's.

A different contribution to African film language through oral tradition is made by *Wend Kuuni* (*The Gift of God*) (Burkina Faso, 1982), by Gaston Kabore. Beautiful cinematography of pastoral village scenes provides the setting for a story of a young boy who wanders out of the forest, unable to speak as the result of a traumatic experience. The boy, Wend Kuuni, is taken in by a family whose young daughter patiently helps him to recover his memories. Set in a time before European presence, *Wend Kuuni* is remarkable for its simple originality and filmic poetry. Like *Jom* and other works of the eighties, it shows what an African film can be.

Just barely submerged beneath these explorations of the oral tradition as a foundation for cinema, is an implicit contestation with the ethnographic visualization of Africa that is most particularly identified with the work of Jean Rouch. A major pioneer in both cinema verite and ethnographic filmmaking, Rouch's films about Africa are free of the enthusiastic racism of earlier treatments. But, according to Rene Vautier, another French filmmaker and one of the founders of Algerian cinema, Rouch's brand of filmmaking remains propaganda against a colonized people. Rouch's ethnographies, in fact, do little to disturb the stereotypic thinking that is reflected in the study of twelfth and seventh grade American schoolchildren cited earlier.

The heart of the difficulty lies with the basis of anthropological study itself—that is, the preservation of a single view of Africa as the Africa of the past. Moreover, Rouch has difficulty explaining why the Africans in his films never speak for themselves. To his credit, Rouch makes a point of training African technicians, and several African directors have worked with him, including Mustapha Alassane and Oumarou Ganda of Niger, Desire Ecare of the Ivory Coast, and Safi Faye of Senegal.

Safi Faye, director

Vautier likens ethnographic films about Africa to an amateur film made by his aunt, featuring Britons circling a mountain on their knees. In fact, African filmmakers have occasionally chosen to reverse roles to study the ethnography of the occidentals. In this frame of mind, Inoussa Ouseini of Niger follows a naive itinerant African worker to the outskirts of Paris where he is victimized by the tricksterism of both blacks and whites, particularly a French prostitute whose friendliness he mistakes for friendship. Poorer but

wiser, he sends home a postcard whose message gives this short film its ironic title—*Paris, C'est Joli* (1975). Kwate Nee-Owoo of Ghana filmed the African art treasures in the British Museum, then descending to the basement where, amid surprised museum officials, he trained his camera on other African religious artifacts heaped about like junk. *You Hide Me* (10 minutes) is a rough, cinema verite expression of a culture outraged.

The point is that a truer, more complete ethnography is recorded by the ninety-one African film directors treated in Guy Hennebelle's *Cineastes d'Afrique Noir*, than in the special curio films of anthropologists. It is a more valid ethnography, not only because Africans speak for themselves from both sides of the camera—a circumstance that Jean Rouch applauds—but also because these films do not delete the pressing considerations of politics and economics, the lack of which makes portrayals of Africa mere souvenir-gathering. It is a more accurate ethnography because through it, these films delineate Africa's transit among the Fanonian stages towards decolonization.

Southern Africa is not surprisingly the source of the most repressed and the most militantly liberationist films of black Africa. In Azania, South Africa, the majority black population is denied the training and opportunity to make films that reflect their lives, embattled by the system of apartheid. According to Molefe Pheto, exploitative gangster and adventure movies are made for black audiences by white film groups, using black actors to front as directors. He reports that playwright Gibson Kent was put into solitary confinement for six months as the producer of an innocuous film that was to be made from his play *How Long*. At the same time, aware of the importance of visual media, black South Africans continue to prepare scripts and train themselves as best they can, both inside the nation and in exile.

N'Jangaan

Many features and documentaries have been made about the South African situation, naturally, but these are not by South Africans. An important exception is *Last Grave at Dimbaza*, shot clandestinely and co-directed by Nana Mahomo, a South African exile living in England. The graves of infants who died from malnutrition in the barren "homelands"—where many South Africans have been dumped by apartheid policies—is the moral launching point for *Last Grave*. It makes an impressive indictment of South Africa's totalitarian scheme of white domination.

Angola and Mozambique offer revolutionary views from the other side of fallen Portuguese colonialism. Said to be the better equipped and more productive of the two, Angola has shown little interest in displaying its films outside its borders. The Angolan revolution thus remains best known on film through *Sambizanga*.

Mozambique formed a modest but determined film institute shortly after independence, which has produced several short documentaries and two features, *Estas Sao As Armas (These Are the Weapons)* and *Mueda: Memorial and Massacre*. The first is a compilation documentary about the overthrow of colonialism. It exposes fascinating stock footage of colonized Mozambique and footage of the revolution in action, secured from Robert Van Lierop, the black American director who made *A Luta Continua (The Struggle Continues)* and *O Povo Organizado (The People Organized)* about the revolution, among others. *Estas Sao As Armas* is a moving recovery of contemporary history that is singular as a depiction made *by* black Africans about their successful liberation.

Mueda is an unusual film of special significance. Ruy Guerra, Brazilian veteran of *cinema novo*, directed the filming of a folk play that is staged annually in the village of Mueda. Just before the armed revolution broke out, politicized Mozanbiquans entered this village near the border of recently independent Tanzania. They demanded their own independence, only to be jailed by the local Portuguese colonial administrators. Nevertheless they kept coming, raising the consciousness of the villagers who finally rose up against the colonizers, only to be massacred. But their rebellion added a spark to the liberating eruption to come.

Mueda offers a provocative vision of what a people's cinema, or a revolutionary folk cinema can be, freed entirely of the pandering styles of entertainment-for-profit. Humble in production values (it has been described as more gray and white

than black and white), it captures stunning distanciation effects lodged in the folk play. Interviews with participants of the original events, laced among the re-enactments, help achieve an unheralded model of the demystifying cinema that progressive western filmmakers have stumbled desperately to discover.

The fate of African cinema hangs in the balance as filmmakers persistenty organize to find remedies for the problems of economics, an underdeveloped infrastructure, and distribution. This organizing was highly strategized with the Naimey resolutions of 1983, which stresses regional cooperation in production, post-production and distribution that will demand a new level of enlightened self-interest among national governments. But whatever the fate of future production and distribution—which could also get worse—from the view of the awakened, active student of films, Africa is no longer the cinematic desert George Sadoul saw twenty-five years ago. The problems and resilient solutions African films have posed are more apposite to other societies than intellectual fashion allows us to recognize. Even if they were not, African films make an invaluable addition to human culture conveyed through motion pictures.

Still another question is whether African filmmakers can reconcile the perennial public desire for fascinating spectacle. When given a fair hearing, the films of Sembene, Hondo, Gerima, and Cisse have won large and enthusiastic audiences. Whether films of this sort or their successors can win sustaining followings in competition with (or to the exclusion of) exploitation films, the battle lines are so clearly drawn, the alternatives so sharply marked, and the space for growth, experimentation and the human-spirited use of films is so vast that Africa may be the last hope for achieving the uplifting and enlightening role that the inventors of cinema first had in mind.

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Kwa Ansa, director (R)

(L) Joan Sandler

(L) Pearl Bowser and Yuet-Fung Ho at reception

The Journey Across Three Continents Tour 1983-1985

California	Berkeley	**Pacific Film Archives**
	San Diego	**Educational Cultural Complex**
District of Columbia	Washington	**Black Film Institute**
Florida	Miami	**Miami-Dade Community College**
Georgia	Atlanta	**Atlanta-Fulton County Library/African Film Society**
Illinois	Chicago	**Community Film Workshop**
Kentucky	Frankfurt	**Whitney Young College**
Massachusetts	Boston	**African American Studies Association**
Minnesota	Minneapolis	**Film in the Cities**
New York	Buffalo	**Buffalo Media Center** **Museum of Science** **State University of New York**
	Huntington, Long Island	**New Community Cinema**
	Ithaca	**Cornell Cinema** **Ithaca College**
	New York City	**American Museum of Natural History** **Ausar Auset Society** **Metropolitan Museum of Art**
	Nyack	**Rockland Community College**
	Port Washington	**Port Washington Public Library**
	Yonkers	**Yonkers Public Library**
North Carolina	Charlotte	**Afro-American Cultural Center**
Ohio	Columbus	**National Black Programming Consortium**
Pennsylvania	Philadelphia	**Neighborhood Film Project, International House** **Afro American Museum**
Texas	Houston	**Houston Museum of Art**

AFRICAN CINEMA: IN PERSPECTIVE

1955 *Afrique Sur Seine*—Shot in Paris, a short film made by Paulin Vieyra (Senegal) whilst he was a student at I.D.H.E.C.

1961 *Une Nation est Nee*—Documentary film on Senegal independence directed by Paulin Vieyra.

1963 *Borom Sarret*—first short film by Ousmane Sembene (Senegal).

1965 *Et La Neige N'etait Plus*—short film by Ababacar Samb Makharam.

1966 Tabar Cherisa creates Les Journees Cinematographiques de Carthage (Tunisia), the first festival devoted to African and Arab films. First Prize awarded to *La Noire de*... (*Black Girl*), Sembene Ousmane's first feature. *La Noire de* is considered the first feature film in the history of black African cinema. The film was made in French.

1968 *Mandabi* or *Le Mandat* (*The Money Order*)—directed by Ousmane Sembene receives the special jury prize at the Venice Film Festival; made in two versions, Wolof and French. *L'aspirant*, short film directed by Soulemane Cisse at VGIK Moscow, where the director was studying film.

1969 Nationalization of the cinema houses in Burkina Faso (Upper Volta). Burkina Faso is then boycotted by the French companies who monopolize film distribution throughout Francophone black Africa.

Fespaco—Panafrican film festival of Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, held for the first time.

Desire Ecare (Ivory Coast), Med Hondo (Mauritania), Oumarou Ganda (Niger) present their first feature films.

First Panafrican Cultural Festival in Algiers. *Diankhabi* (*La Teune Fille*), short fiction film directed by Mahama Traore.

1970 Creation of FEPACI (Panafrican Federation of Filmmakers). *Le Wazzon Polygame*, directed by Oumarou Ganda. *Les Ponts de Paris*, short film directed by Ola Balogun (Nigeria). First feature by Med Hondo (Mauritania), *Soleil O*.

1971 *Emitai*—directed by Ousmane Sembene. *Diola Koudou*, directed by Ababacar Samb Makharam, made in Wolof and French.

1972 *La Passante*—short film by Safi Faye (Senegal).

1973 *Boubou Cravate*—directed by Daniel Kamwa (Cameroon), short film made in French.

La Retour—first feature-length fiction film directed by Ignace-Solo Randrasana (Madagascar).

Touki-Bouki—first feature film by Djibril Diop Mambety (Senegal).

Saitane—directed by Oumarou Ganda.

1974 *Les Bicots-Negres Vos Voisins*—directed by Med Hondo (Mauritania).

Ceddo

Gourma

Emitai

Musica Mocambique

1975 *Nationality: Immigre*—directed by Sidney Sokhana (Mauritania). Series of documentaries on the life of workers in different sections, among them *I am Angolan and I Work with Strength*, made by various film directors (Angola).

The African filmmakers charter is voted during the second congress of FEPACI in Algiers.

Xala—directed by Sembene Ousmane (Senegal).

Perantal—documentary film directed by Samba Felix Ndiaye (Senegal).

Lettre Paysanne—directed by Safi Faye.

Muna Moto—first long feature film from Cameroon, directed by Jean Pierre Dikongue-Pina.

Le Nouveau Venu—directed by Richard de Medeiros (Benin).

Harvest: 3000 Years—directed by Haile Gerima (Ethiopia).

Destiny—directed by Sega Coulibali (Mali).

1977 *Ceddo*—directed by Sembene Ousmane.

Baara—directed by Soulemane Cisse.

1978 *Tiyabu Bira* (*La Circumcision*)—first feature film by Meussa Bathaily (Senegal).

2nd Symposium of Carthage, on production and distribution of African and Arab films.

1979 *West Indies*—directed by Med Hondo (Mauritania).

1980 The C.I.D.C.—first Interafrican consortium of film distribution, created by several African countries to buy the distrubution networks of U.A.C., a subsidiary of the French Company UGC. UGC is the company that monopolized almost all films distributed throughout Francophone black Africa.

L'exile—directed by Oumarou Ganda (Niger).

Cry Freedom—directed by Ola Balogum (Nigeria).

La Chapelle—directed by Jean-Michel Tchissoukou (Congo).

Jom—directed by Ababacar Samb Makharam (Senegal).

1981 *First MOGPAFIS* (mogadishu Panafrican Film Symposium) takes place in Somalia, November 1981.

Residence Surveillee—directed by Paulin Vieyera (Senegal).

Djelli—directed by Fadika Kramo Lancine, awarded First Prize for direction of first feature film (Ivory Coast).

Estas Sao As Armas (*These are the weapons*), 1978 film from Mozambique wins technical prize for editing at the 1981 Fespaco.

1982 A Symposium on film distribution and production is organized by African filmmakers in Niamey (Niger). The result is the publication of African filmmakers manifesto of Niamey.

1983 *Finye* (*The Wind*) by Soulemane Cisse (Mali) receives the First Prize at Carthage and Ouagadougou film festivals.

Wend Kuuni—directed by Gaston Kabore also wins prizes at above festivals.

Reprinted from Filmsta 84, *Bombay, India, January, 1984.*

BLACK AMERICAN CINEMA: HISTORICAL HIGHLIGHTS

The Homesteader

Oscar Micheaux

1913 *The Railroad Porter*—short by Bill Foster, believed to be the first film made by a black American.

1918 *The Homesteader*—first feature-length film written and produced by Oscar Micheaux.

1924 *Body and Soul*—directed by Oscar Micheaux, starring Paul Robeson in his first screen role.

1931 *The Exile*—directed by Oscar Micheaux, the first black American sound feature.

1948 The Betrayal—closes after a brief run, and Micheaux retires.

1951 *Native Son*—Richard Wright's film version of his celebrated novel is shot in Argentina.

1967 *The Dutchman*—Leroy Jones' (Amiri Baraka) film version of his play, shot in England.

1968 Public television creates the first national one-hour monthly news investigation program, *Black Journal*, with veteran filmmaker William Greaves as executive producer.

1970 Independent Black American Cinema—first black American film festival opens in New York.

1971 *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*—by Melvin Van Peebles, one of the few productions of the decade to turn a huge profit for a black filmmaker, rather than white investors.

1978 Founding of the Black Filmmakers Foundation in New York City.

1979 Nantes Trois Continent Film Festival—retrospective of 10 Black American films, first European festival of black American independents;

National Black Programming Consortium established.

1980 FNAC in Paris at the Forum Les Halles—hosts 40 films and 10 filmmakers at first major retrospective of black films in Europe.

1981 Paris Retrospective Independent Black American Cinema 1920-1980 begins its American tour in New York State.

1985 Pan African Film Festival of Ouagadougou hosts a group of black American film artists and their work for the first time.

A Selected Filmography of Films from Africa and the Black Diaspora

AFRICA

Angola

Sara Maldoror — Sambizanga — 1972

The beginning stages of the Angolan revolution from the point of view of a woman whose husband is imprisoned by the Portuguese.

Benin

Richard de Medeiros — Le Nouveau Venu — 1976

Burkina Faso

Gaston J.M. Kabore — Wend Kuuni (Gift of God) — 1982

The story of a mute boy who is lost in the bush, and adopted by a loving Mossi family.

Idrissa Ouedraogo — Poko — 1981

A village woman dies in labor when she cannot reach the city for emergency care.

Cameroon

Jean Pierre Dikonque-Pipa — Muna Moto — 1976

Cameroon's first feature-length film.

Le Prix de la Liberte (The Price of Liberty) — 1978

Story of a young woman who leaves her family and rural life for the city.

Daniel Kamwa — Boubou Cravate — 1973

Our Daughter — 1980

The Mbarga's, a poor family living on the outskirts of Yaounde, must weigh their daughter's education against the old ways of thinking.

Pousse Pousse — 1980

A light comedy about a messenger named Pousse Pousse who tries to satisfy the increasing demands of Papa Bisseke for his daughter's dowry.

Congo

Jean-Michel Tchissoukou — La Chapelle (The Chapel) — 1980

Tchissoukou explores the conflict of Christian missionaries with traditional local beliefs during the 1930's.

Ethiopia

Haile Gerima — Harvest: 3,000 Years — 1976

A peasant family's struggle under the feudal conditions of a wealthy landlord's farm.

Michael Papatakis — Gouma — 1976

Parable of a young man's confrontation with life when he accidentally shoots his best friend, and must travel the country to collect blood money.

Ghana

King Ampaw — Kukurantumi — 1983

The story of star-crossed lovers in the village of Kukurantumi.

Kwaw Ansah — Love Brewed in an African Pot — 1980

A love affair between the daughter of a civil servant and the son of a fisherman raises issues of caste and class.

Ato Yanney — His Majesty's Sergeant — 1983

Set in the jungles of Burma during World War II, three soldiers become separated from their companies and take refuge in a cave. But the white private refuses to accept the command of the ranking African sergeant.

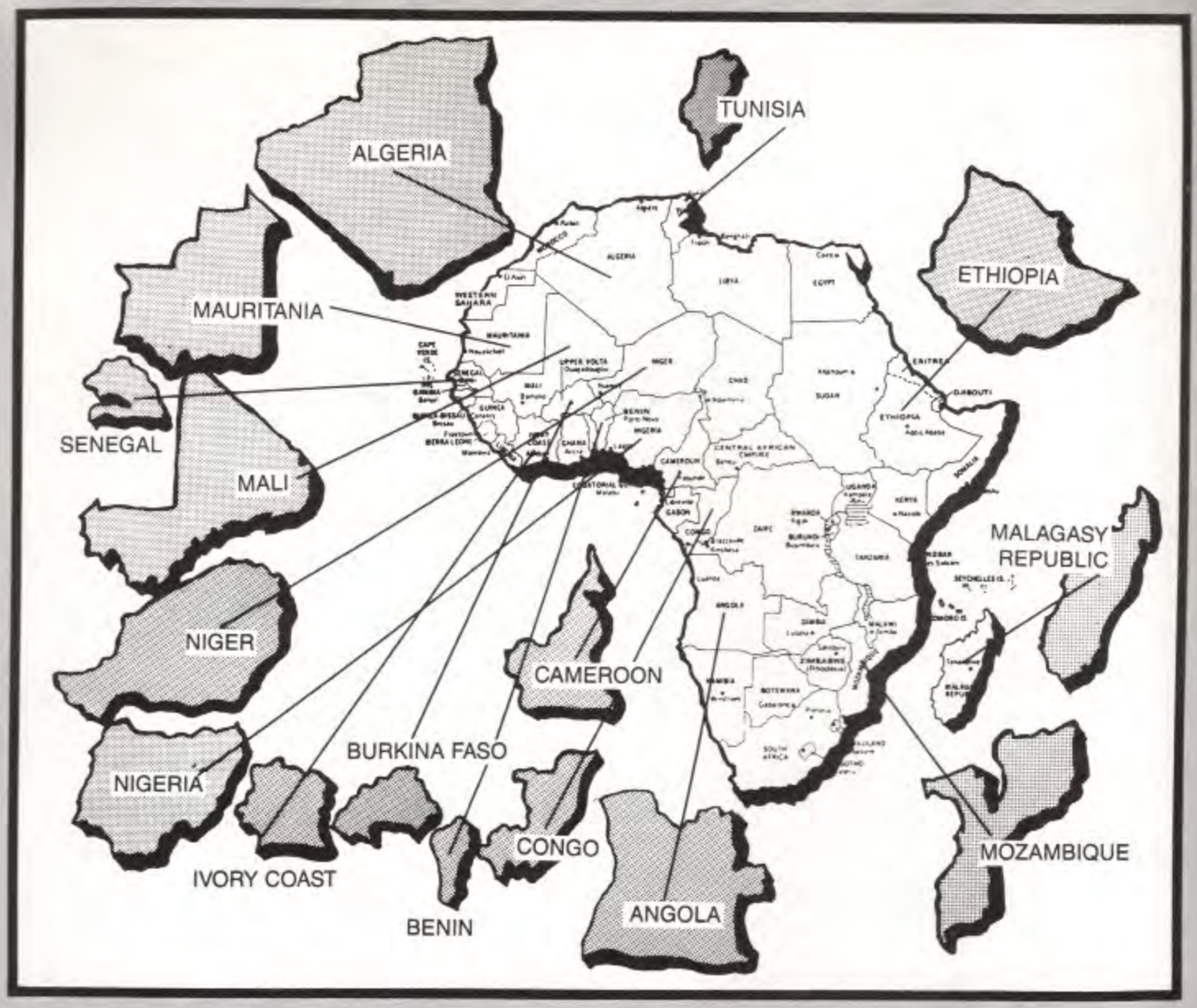
Ivory Coast

Fadiko Kramo-Lancine — Djelli — 1981

Kramo-Lancine's first feature length film.

Madagascar

Ignace-Solo Randrasana — La Retour (The Return) — 1973



Mali

Soulemane Cisse

L'aspirant — 1968

Den Musso (The Girl) — 1975

A young woman is unable to communicate with her father after she becomes pregnant by a man from the lower classes.

Baara (The Porter) — 1978

Baara journeys through urban Bamako through the eyes of a cartman.

Finye (The Wind) — 198?

Two students fight against inequality.

Sega Caoulibali

Destiny — 1976

Mauritania

Sidney Sokhana

Nationality: Immigre — 1975

Mozambique

Instituto Nacional de Cinema

Estas Sao As Armas (These Are the Weapons — 1979

Compilation documentary on the overthrow of colonialism.

Mueda: Memorial and Massacre

Directed by Ruy Guerra, *Mueda* is a folk play staged annually in the village that rose to rebellion before Mozambique's armed revolution.

Unity in Feast

Focus on the preservation of culture through traditional music, with the backdrop of the 1st Festival of Traditional Song and Music.

Niger

Oumarou Ganda

Le Wazzon Polygame 1970

L'exile (The Exile) 1980

Ganda plays an African ambassador to France in this allegory about the moral of keeping one's word.

Inoussa Ouseini

Paris, C'Est Joli 1975

A short tale of a naive African migrant worker who is tricked by both blacks and whites when he comes to the outskirts of Paris.

Nigeria

Ola Balogun

Les Ponts de Paris 1970

Cry Freedom 1980

Senegal

Meusa Bathaily

Tiyabu Bira (La Circumcision) 1978

Bathaily's first feature-length film.

Ben Diogaye Beye

Sey Seyeti (One Man, Several Women) 1980

Beye explores the role of polygamy in a changing society.

Safi Faye

Lettre Paysanne (Letter from a Village) 1975

Faye's first feature-length film is about her own village, and the problems that arise when it is forced into single-crop farming of peanuts.

Fad Jal 1979

Faye based this episodic story on her own family's experience, using ritual reenactments to tell the village's collective history.

La Passante 1980

Ababacar Samb Makharam

Et La Neige N'etait Plus 1965

Koudou 1971

A young woman is unable to complete the ritual of tatooing and suffers an emotional breakdown when she is ostracized by her peers.

Jom 1980

A griot reminds striking workers of their "jom," an individual's moral source, to inspire them to keep up the fight.

Djibril Diop-Mambety

Touki-Bouki 1973

Samba Felix Ndiaye

Perantal 1975

Documentary.

Ousmane Sembene

Borom Sarret 1963

Film essay on street life in Dakar, through the eyes of a cartman.

Niaye 1965

La Noire de . . . Black Girl 1966

Considered the first African feature film, *La Noire de* explores the anguish of a Senegalese woman when she is taken to the Antibes to work for a French couple.

Mandabi

(Le Mandat, The Money Order) 1968

Based on Sembene's novel, *Mandabi* is a comedy about a man who tries to cash a money order sent from abroad.

Tauw 1970

A young man comes to terms with the responsibilities of adulthood against the backdrop of the decomposing traditions of an ancient society.

Gouma

Emitai (God of Thunder) 1972

Conflict grows when French colonizers descend upon the villagers of the Casmance region during World War I, to take their young men for military service.

Xala (Curse of Impotence) 1974

A comic-satiric essay on neocolonialism, is the story of El Hadj, a corrupt bureaucrat-businessman.

Ceddo 1978

The *ceddo*, or common people of a village are aroused to resistance when the King's daughter is kidnapped.

Momar Thiam Luttes Casamancaises 1968

Karim 1970

Baks 1974

Mahama Johnson Traore Diankhabi (La Teune Fille) 1969

N'Diangine 1975

A critique of the power of marabouts, and their control over the young boys at a Koranic school.

Paulin Vieyra, Mamadou Saar, Robert Christan Afrique Sur Seine (African on the Seine) 1955

The alienation of a young African man on the boulevards of Paris.

Une Nation est Nee (A Nation is Born) 1961

Documentary on Senegalese independence.

Residence Surveille 1981

South Africa

Nana Mahomo Last Grave at Dimbaza

The effects of apartheid on the Azanian people.

Taurw

EUROPE

England

Horace Ove

King Carnival 1972

King Carnival traces the origins and influences of Carnival through Trinidad's turbulent history.

Pressure 1974

A disillusioned black youth living in England is politicized by the pressures of racism, and the acquiescence of his immigrant parents.

A Hole in Babylon 1978

Based on the real-life story of three men who unwittingly rob a mob-controlled spaghetti house in order to raise money for a community center.

Menelik Shabazz

Burning An Illusion 1982

Two young people must face the realities of second class citizenship in the Brixton section of London.

Makedi Levi

The Garland 1981

Race Rhetoric & Rastafari 1982

Levi's personal view of Rastafari life.

France

Med Hondo

Soleil-O (O Sun) 1970

The story of a nameless accountant living in France. Hondo's first feature-length film.

Les Bicots-Negres Vos Voisins (Dirty Arabs, Dirty Niggers, Your Neighbors) 1973

Documentary about the abusive use of North African and black African workers in France.

Nous Aurons Toute la Morte Pour Dormir (We'll Have All Death to Sleep) 1977

Documentary on the freedom fighters of the Polisario movement.

West Indies: The Fugitive Slaves of Liberty 1979

A cinematic opera set on a huge slave ship, tells the history of 400-years of French imperialism in the West Indies.

Martinique/France

Euzhan Palcy

Sugar Cane Alley 1983

The story of Jose, a young boy in Martinique during the 1930's, whose loving relationship with his grandmother M'Man Tine and the hardships of life on a sugar plantation, shapes his sensibilities as a young writer.

THE AMERICAS

United States

St. Clair Bourne

Let the Church Say Amen 1974
Follows a young black minister as he leaves the seminary and ventures into the real world.

On the Boulevard 1984
A young musician and singer struggle to make their careers in Hollywood.

Larry Bullard and Carolyn Johnson

A Dream is What You Wake Up From 1979
Docudrama examines the contrasting lifestyles of two black couples.

Charles Burnett

Killer of Sheep 1977
The moving portrait of Stan, a man employed in a Los Angeles slaughterhouse. Burnett's first feature-length film.

The Horse 1977
A drama that explores the emotional response of five men and a young boy to the shooting of a sick horse.

My Brother's Wedding 1983
A man must choose between family obligations and the funeral of his best friend.

Ben Caldwell

I and I: An African Allegory 1977
An experimental film that encompasses black history, mysticism, and the effects of contemporary urban environments on black spirituality and political perspective.

Ayoka Chenzira

Hair Piece: A Film for Nappyheaded People
An animated satire on black consciousness from the standpoint of the straightening comb and other hair care devices.

Carl Clay

Radio 1981
The journey of a radio through the consciousness of a black community.

Kathleen Collins

The Cruz Brothers and Miss Malloy 1980
The adventures of three Puerto Rican brothers and their encounter with an old dowager in a small town.

Losing Ground 1982
A philosophy professor, married to a flamboyant artist, confronts her resentment towards his casual affairs.

Ivan Dixon and Sam Greenlee

The Spook Who Sat By the Door 1973
Based on a novel by Sam Greenlee, the film tells the story of the first black CIA agent who uses his training to organize a black revolution in major American cities.

Julie Dash

Diary of an African Nun 1977
An interior monologue of a young African novice consumed with religious and cultural conflict.

Four Women 1978
Dash experiments with stylized movements and dress to express the spirit of black womanhood, from its roots in Africa to life in America.

Illusions 1983
The story of Mignon Dupree, an executive at a fictitious Hollywood studio during the 1940's, who is taken for white by her coworkers.

Robert Gardner

Clarence and the Angel 1979
The story of a young boy who is taught to read by his hyperkinetic friend Angel.

Haile Gerima

Child of Resistance 1972
A cinematic portrayal of a black woman imprisoned—physically and intellectually.

Bush Mama 1976
Portrait of Dorothy, a woman living in the Watts section of Los Angeles and raising her daughter alone.

Ashes and Embers 1982
The episodic story of a Vietnam vet still angry and psychologically scarred after eight years home from the war.

Haile Gerima

Killer of Sheep

Michelle Parkerson

Bless Their Little Hearts

Bill Greaves

Julie Dash

Alile Sharon Larkin

Bill Gunn & Sarrett Scott on **Losing Ground**

Larry Clark and Pearl Bowser

Ashes and Embers

Bill Gunn

Ganja and Hess 1973

A take-off on the Dracula legend, *Ganja and Hess* explores the realms of Christian myth, sexual definition, cultural dislocation and blood ritual.

Woodie King

The Long Night 1976

The dilemma of a poor family and the pressures of urban decay sets the scene for the story of Steely, a boy who loses the money his mother won in a lottery, and is afraid to go home.

Death of a Prophet 1981

Docudrama follows the last day of Malcolm X.

Charles Lane

A Place in Time 1978

A silent satire in the burlesque tradition about a young street painter who uses apathy as the defense against pressures of the big city.

Sharon Alile Larkin

Your Children Come Back to You 1978

A contemporary allegory about Tovi, a young girl who faces the choice between African values and western assimilation.

Stan Lathan

Almost a Man 1977

Based on a story by Richard Wright about a young man in the 1930's South.

The Sky is Gray 1980

Based on a short story by Ernest J. Gaines about a mother and young son in rural Louisiana during the 1940's.

Go Tell It on the Mountain 1984

Based on James Baldwin's autobiographical novel about a young boy who comes to manhood in the South and Harlem of the 1930's.

Spike Lee

Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop: We Cut Heads 1983

The story of a numbers runner in the Brooklyn section of New York.

Jesse Maple

Will

A New York City father tries to provide a role model for his son, who is growing up in a drug-ridden neighborhood.

Richard Maurice

Eleven PM 1924

A young writer dreams the last chapter from his book, a complicated story of rivalry, revenge and reincarnation.

Oscar Micheaux

Swing 1924

The story of Mandy, a maid who comes North and becomes a blues singer.

Body and Soul 1924

Paul Robeson made his film debut in this controversial nightmare fantasy of a matron of the church and her minister.

The Exile 1931

The tale of an "exoduster," one of the many blacks who homesteaded the west during the 1920's.

Henry Miller

Death of a Dunbar Girl 1977

The story of a mother-daughter relationship and the effects of caste and class.

Billy Woodberry

Bless Their Little Hearts 1983

A working class family in Watts struggles to cope when their father loses his job.

Trinidad and Tobago

Hugh Robertson

Bim 1974

Jackie Shearer, director (L)

FILMS FROM THE THIRD WORLD NEWSREEL COLLECTION

Africa

Angola: The People Have Chosen
Cancer of Betrayal
Generations of Resistance
Medina Boe
Naitou
Namibia — Independence Now!
Nossa Terra
Viva Freelimo

Asia

A Day of Plane Hunting
The Fate of Gum Hui and Un Hui
Hanoi: Tuesday the 13th
Laos: The Forgotten War
People's War
Red Detachment of Women
Seventy-nine Springtimes of Ho Chi Minh
Struggle for Life
U.S. Techniques and Genocide in Vietnam
Women of Telecommunications Station #6
Young Puppeteers of Vietnam

Latin America

Atencingo
Bay of Pigs
Cuban Teachers
Don Pedro: La Vida de un Pueblo
F.A.L.N. (National Liberation Front of Venezuela)
For the First Time
Fuera Yanqui
Los Gamines
Golpeandos en la Selva
Isle of Youth
Los Hijos de Sandino (The Children of Sandino)
Mi Patria Occupada (My Country Occupied)
The Terror and the Time
Una Y Otra Vez

Global Issues

Beirut: On a Clear Day You Can See Peace
Borroka: The Struggle
Controlling Interest
Digression on Triangles
The Earth Belongs to the People
Grove Music
The Lament of Arthur O'Leary
Paris in the Month of May (Le Joie Moi de Mai...)
Scenes of the Class Struggle in Portugal
Trick Bag

Community Issues

El Pueblo Se Levanta
From Spikes to Spindles
Lincoln Hospital
Loose Pages Bound
Los Siete de La Raza
Mississippi Triangle
Omai Fa'atasi: Samoa mo Samoa
Something's Rotten in Little Tokyo
Troublemakers
Wreck of the New York Subway

Housing

Break and Enter
The Case Against Lincoln Center
Community Plot
The Fall of the I-Hotel
Homefront
People's Firehouse #1
Redevelopment
Simpson Street
We the People

Women

A Dream is What You Wake Up From
A Space to Be Me
After the Earthquake
Fei Tein: Goddess in Flight
Fresh Seeds in the Big Apple
Inside Women Inside
Makeout
My Life, Our Struggle (Minha Vida, Nossa Luta)
Sewing Woman
She's Beautiful When She's Angry
Suzanne, Suzanne
To Love, Honor, and Obey
The Woman's Film

Immigrant Issues

Bittersweet Survival
Freckled Rice
Garment Workers of Southern California
Hito Hata: Raise the Banner
Illegal Aliens
Pieces of a Dream
To Be Me: Tony Quon
Wataridori: Birds of Passage

Student Organizing

America
Columbia Revolt
High School Rising
San Francisco State: On Strike

Human Relationships

Ganja and Hess
The Horse
Killer of Sheep

Prisoners

Bobby Seale
Gaman: to endure
In the Event Anyone Disappears
Teach Our Children
We Demand Freedom

The 60's

Black Panther
Black Power
I Have a Dream
Summer '68
Yippie

U.S. at War/Vietnam

Army
L.B.J.
No Game
Only the Beginning
R.O.T.C.
The Selling of the Pentagon
So the People Should Know
Time of the Locust

About Third World Newsreel

The emergence of movements for social change during the 1960's stirred the imaginations and awakened the commitment of many artists. In 1967, a collective of filmmakers and community activists established Newsreel, which would later become Third World Newsreel. Their goal: to produce alternative media that reflected the changing times. Towards that end, dozens of films have been produced, exploring themes of civil rights, community development, women's issues, prisons, labor, Third World culture and international concerns.

Fast approaching its third decade, Third World Newsreel has grown to encompass film/video distribution, exhibition, archives, information services and training, as well as production. The Exhibition Program, under the direction of Pearl Bowser, has organized touring packages of Third World Films each year since 1979. The Journey Across Three Continents film & lecture series is the culmination of three years of research.

Publications from Third World Newsreel

Independent Black American Cinema: 1920-1980
In Color: 60 Years of Images of Minority Women in Films ... 1921-1981
Anthology of Asian American Film & Video

Photo Credits
Black Filmmakers Foundation
Chamba Educational Film Services
Comite Africain de Cineastes
Museum of Modern Art
Mypheduh Films
Operation Cross Roads
The Independent

Project conceived and researched by Pearl Bowser

Journey Across Three Continents: Film & Lecture Series

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