Ukadike, Nwachukwu Frank. - *Black African Cinema*

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The time is long past where any publication on the subject of African film making would immediately qualify as an important work simply for having been published. *Black African Cinema* may thus be considered a useful contribution to the literature on sub-Saharan African film making. Its main objective is to develop the connections between Africa’s oral traditions (in Ukadike’s terms Africa’s traditional media) and black African cinematic practices. Ukadike wishes to assert the authenticity and originality of African film making by legitimizing it through precolonial African cultural heritage, traversing the cultural disruption and distortion of the colonial period. The positive contribution of this work is, however, somewhat undermined by the constraints posed by Ukadike’s use of authenticity and by a reductive aspect in the argument connecting film and oral traditions. This review proposes a summary of Ukadike’s monograph, indicating the manner in which it should be seen as a positive addition to the field and also explores the criticism aforementioned.

Ukadike argues, although with some reservations, that black African cinema has attained aesthetic and artistic maturity, and although a wide variety of Hollywood and European cinematic practices are evident in these films, black African film makers have used these practices to forge their own cinematic language and style (p. 4). By investigating the “Africanness” of a film makers intentionality, Ukadike hopes to create new strategies and new critical criteria for appraising black African film making.

The methodology is informed by the cultural dynamics of African traditions along with a strong emphasis on the ideological, socioeconomic and geopolitical context of African film making. This type of interdisciplinary contextual approach, accompanying formal film analysis is necessary given the complexity of the subject. The classic anticolonial texts (Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Albert Memmi, Ngugi wa Thiong’o) surface in Ukadike’s work and he also draws heavily on dependency theory (André Gunder Frank, Samir Amin) so that the latter perspective dominates. While Ukadike recognises the limitations of a dependency theory approach and draws on other work, such as Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser, the totalizing nature of dependencia sometimes surfaces in the work.

The book is organised into six chapters. The first chapter begins by dividing historic time in Africa into three periods. Africa’s oral traditions in the period before white conquest are thus briefly elaborated, followed by a review of cinema as a form of cultural and ideological domination under colonial rule, corresponding to a second period, and finally, independent African film production “in the dying stages of colonialism”. He then turns to a criticism of anthropological film making which, in his opinion, is only a stage in the evolution of colonial cinema. The work of directors such as David and Judith MacDougall, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Jean Rouch and Jamie Uys are lumped together without distinction and judged racially negative work, void of value.

Chapter two discusses the francophone origins of black African cinema. There is a brief recapitulation of the structure of film production prior to independence although very little is said about the specific institutions and people who were fundamental to the launching of sub-Saharan film production. Most of the chapter is comprised of a discussion on the films and the ideological and artistic tendencies of
Ousmane Sembene and Med Hondo. Ukadike situates the discussion of their film making into the pan-African movement, the political philosophies of the time and liberation movements in Africa.

Developments in anglophone film production form the substance of the third chapter. Television in Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, Nigeria and Zimbabwe are summarized to show how television in black Africa, if properly organized, could contribute to a base for viable film industries. This discussion is followed by a look at independent film production in Ghana and Nigeria. Nigeria's well known Yoruba based cinema is also reviewed with an objective and critical eye. This is one of the most interesting chapters of the book, in particular because of current interest in Ghana and Nigeria as potential models of film production in black Africa.

The fourth chapter forms the core of Ukadike's work. He develops the links between oral tradition and film making, looking at films during the seventies and eighties. The variety of cultural and symbolic configurations of African storytelling, woven around the relationship among the artist, text, and spectator (elaborated in Chapter One) is integrated with the specificities of technical reproduction to inform the film analysis. Oral narratives are thus seen as a force for "Africanizing" film language. Elements such as interventions and digressions that help to shift points of view in time and space; dramatic illustrations carved out of multiple narrative voices, for example, the story-within-a-story; transgressions by means of flashback and flash forward; and music as narrative structure are considered as they function within the films (p. 213). A section on cinemas in Angola, Mozambique and Guinea Bissau, as they were inspired by the Cuban revolution and the film industry which developed there, are nonetheless seen as clearly influenced by oral traditions.

Ukadike raises a contentious issue in this chapter with regard to authenticity and "Africanness". His assessment of a ten minute love scene in Visages de femmes by Désiré Écaré (1985) is "if you take this sequence out, the film is completely African" (p. 221). This reviewer would argue that Visages de Femmes is African with or without the particular sequence in question. The overt sexual exposure may not conform to African sensibilities and norms in portrayal of sex in society, however sexist codes are not exclusive to Western society, they also exist in Africa. Ukadike simply resolves this issue by suggesting that it is the influence of external (French) assistance which could be responsible for such a sequence.

Likewise, with regards to Bal poussière by Henri Duparc (1988), Ukadike judges certain scenes, such as close ups on female chest and buttocks, as questionable in their authenticity and catering to non-African viewers. "For Western viewers, these features may be more gripping and profoundly alluring, but for African critics, including feminists, Duparc's experimental interludes are simply jaundiced, misguided, stereotypical" (p. 288). The utility of a particular sequence can certainly be questioned with respect to its function in a film. However, to determine that a film is more or less African according to particular cultural, aesthetic or political criteria, while serving a useful purpose, should not be used to box in a film and create an "Africaness" list with which to analyse any film made by an African director. To suggest that elements of a film which are clearly exploitative, stereotypical and questionable, in that they cater to a particular commercialisation of sex and women, is the fault and influence of non-African sources is to avoid African self-criticism and ultimately to undermine the autonomy of African film directors.
Chapter five examines new developments in black African cinema. Ukadike distinguishes two trends: in the first category are films placed "in the service of political consciousness, and in the second, films that are thematically audacious and innovative but whose sociopolitical allegory is diffused by pandering to the imitation of alien conventions and commercialization" (p. 247). Ousmane Sembene, Med Hondo, Haile Gerima, Gaston Kaboré, Souleymane Cissé and Kwah Ansah are examples of film makers in the first category while Idrissa Ouedraogo, Cheikh Oumar Sissoko and Henri Duparc exemplify the second category. He defines this "new breed" of cinema as a filmic subterfuge of "passion for ethnographic information (thematic construction); profilmic and extrafilmic organization (immutable landscape); and aesthetic reconciliation (the incorporation or oral art)" (p. 249). For Ukadike, African films must critically examine African issues from an African perspective and good films are those which do not resort to clichés. "The knowledge that is derived from this practice is pan-African in its spirit of recovery and in its retrieval and recontextualization of Africa's past within Africa's present". "Sarraounia, Camp de Thiaroye, and Heritage... Africa are African films par excellence" (p. 303).

Two issues in particular surface in the concluding chapter. First, Ukadike is very skeptical of the tendency toward coproductions which dominates film making in the eighties (except in Nigeria). While he recognizes the necessity, he is very critical of the practice especially when the French are involved. Second, while he insists that black African film aesthetics can only be understood in the plural form, that they come from a wide array of cultural references, African authenticity is in short, equated to infusing derivatives and elaborations of the oral tradition. If the language of cinema has been defined primarily in the West, oral tradition has served Africans in defining an African cinematographic language.

Ukadike’s work is the second general publication, written in English, entirely dedicated to sub-Saharan African film making, following Manthia Diawara's African Cinema: Politics and Culture. It expands on Diawara’s work, by providing more extensive contextual content and principally by placing more emphasis on linkages between film analysis and oral traditions. The organisation of the books is similar, however, African Cinema narrows in on some particular subjects such as the FEPACI (Fédération panafricaine des cinéastes) and FESPACO (Festival panafricain du cinéma et de la télévision de Ouagadougou) and takes a more historical approach to French involvement in West African film production. While both books are of a general nature, Diawara’s monograph avoids the more Afrocentric underpinning of Ukadike’s book.

Black African Cinema enhances the literature on the subject for a number of reasons. The most important reason is the manner in which Ukadike clearly threads cinematic practices to Africa’s oral traditions linking these through historical periods. He also accommodates larger thematic issues emanating from political and cultural experiences as manifested by colonialism and neocolonialism. He makes clear distinctions between films from former British, French and Portuguese colonies, and the chapters on Ghanaian and Nigerian film making expand on previous work. The work is well-researched and written and contains an extensive bibliography. If on occasion he skims the top of some topics, it is understandable given the wide scope of the subject treated in a single monograph.

Ukadike's work is however, introductory. His objective to establish new criteria for the analysis of black African film making is a significant step in a positive direction. At the same time, Africa's oral traditions should not be used as the ultimate measure of what constitutes a supposedly authentic African cinema, thereby reducing it to this criteria. New and old trends in black African film making need to be interrogated for their implications within growing commercial tendencies vis-à-vis both international and African audiences and within auteur cinema, which is more capable of carrying through progressive social traditions, and not, by displacing responsibility onto Western hands. The pan-African consciousness which Ukadike calls for in African film making is undoubtably valuable, so is the need to find specificities and diversity within, and not only across, the entire African continent.

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