

THE CONTRIBUTION AND THE INFLUENCE OF BLACK AFRICAN CINEMA

Since 1963 almost 200 films have been made by African authors. This provides a suitable quantity of documents to permit an attempt to study them as a group. These films are the work of a hundred directors and so perhaps can allow an analysis of their personalities. But can we suppose that they represent all of Africa? This is hardly probable. The film-makers and their crews belong to the upper social levels. Educated, well-traveled on other continents, highly qualified intellectually and professionally, they associate with the leading class even though their financial means may not always suffice to realize their aspirations. They belong to the intelligentsia. But, because of the educative power of film, we can foresee that they will contribute to the formation of the masses. The Africa presented in their films is not that of today but maybe that of tomorrow.

African cinema is quite young and has obviously not yet said all that it has to say. But an attentive analysis of films to date should indicate the major patterns of original contribution. As each culture expresses itself by film, it enriches the medium with nuances, methods and new tendencies.

Translated by R. Scott Walker.

Reflection on African cinema is doubly useful. On the one hand, this study can show something of Africa itself; and, on the other, it can bring about a re-examination of certain ready-made ideas. The film-makers who interest us approach cinema with a new spirit. Cultural prejudices are less prominent among them than among people formed by an older cinematic tradition.

Two themes emerge. African films have made an undeniable original contribution, but lacunae in these films and their renunciation of certain forms of embellishment are every bit as significant.

I. SOBRIETY

There is a triple refusal in African cinema: refusal of the "personality cult," refusal of violent feelings and a refusal of refinements in camera technique and even, perhaps, of a structured cinematic grammar.

From the beginning, Western film fans have attached much importance to the personality of actors. The cult of the stars, with its ridiculous excesses, was a characteristic of the cinematic art. From 1920 to 1945 film magazines were essentially filled with articles on actors. Cinema followed the path of the theater and opera; the "*diva*" gave way, in the heart of the public, to the "star." Since 1950 film clubs and critics have concentrated on the personalities of the authors, regaining an ancient humanist and scholarly tradition. Particularly since the Renaissance, works of art are signed; sculptors and architects are known, just like poets and musicians.

Up until now African cinema has not engaged in seeking personalities. On the one hand the ideologies popular at present incite everyone to proclaim that he is at the service of his people, that he is content to be the spokesman for the "masses" or that his sole purpose is to educate them. But, beyond that, cultural traditions are not favorable to an expression of individualism. From a very young age children learn to adapt themselves to the patriarchal community rather than submitting or opposing themselves to their own parents. Terms denoting relationships are revealing in this respect; all the brothers of the father are usually given the same title as the father himself. Psychologists note that the relation with the father seems rather loose. The

absence of a paternal image, strongly structured and structuring, has consequences in those situations where authority and competition are at stake. It seems that the Oedipal situation is transferred from the father to his siblings. The rival is no longer the father, who is experienced as an absence, but his brother or brothers. According to another author, "These are rivals which it is better to equalize by generosity in social relations. Rivalry is recompensed by a strong solidarity. To rival is to be equal to one's rival but not to surpass him."

Such a cultural background is not conducive to the appearance of individualistic expression. It is logical from this that a director does not attempt to place a personal touch in his films and that he would even attempt to eliminate such if, despite everything, it appeared.

In every artistic domain, African creators constantly recall the same principles. Art leaves them indifferent, and "art for art's sake" irritates them like a personal insult. They do not claim the title of author. On the occasion of the exhibition "Senegalese Art Today," an article contained revealing passages: "Art is functional, it is neither entertainment nor ornament added to an object... the work of art is made by all and for all..." In the area of film, any critical articles which discuss the temperament of the author or his personal ideas always seem to irritate film-makers.

Nevertheless, some authors evidently tell their own stories, like O. Ganda in *Cabascabo*. The example of Safi Faye is even more striking. In a moving epilogue to her film *Lettre paysanne*, she shows a close-up of her grandfather announcing that she has just learned of his death. Whoever has seen the film cannot forget such a personal cinematic disclosure.

Even if film-makers seek to avoid a personal touch, they can hardly do so. Every work is the expression of its author and bears a certain reflection of his personality. But this attitude of suspicion before personal expression is important and should remind everyone, film-makers, readers or art lovers, that each work has its own value and that the cult of names is often vain.

As to the actors, refusal of stardom is probably less strict. A good number of roles are filled by amateurs; this confirms the impression of an art which issues from the people. But profes-

sional actors are sometimes upset at being ignored by the press at film festivals.

A detailed examination of the films obliges us to go further. Rejecting a personality cult, directors construct action without heroes. Sometimes a group plays the role of collective hero without the spectator being able to discern precisely who is the leader or the chief. The West is astonished. Is it an inability to portray well-sketched original characters, to give them costumes, gestures, characteristic language? Are film-makers satisfied to show a group because they are incapable of describing in detail the various persons who constitute the group? This is not the case. As a matter of fact it is a question of choice and process. In some films where a hero's presence is essential, the author does not hesitate to accentuate the other developments of the plot to balance out the principal adventure and its protagonist. A good example comes from Oumarou Ganda in the film *Saïtane* (*Satan*). As the title indicates, the principal character, played by the author, is a magician and a wily charlatan. Nevertheless O. Ganda presents his film as "the history of a young couple in which the woman is seduced..." This distortion of perspective seems to come from an excessive desire for discretion on the part of the author in the central roles, who wishes to efface himself as much as possible.

This concern for anonymity is found in political films on immigration. There are no heroes, no action, just a series of juxtaposed sketches tied together by a commentary.

The authors do not seek to emphasize their own roles as creative personalities, and they attempt to diminish the personality of their heroes. But they say they have an obligation to educate their people, and indeed one is struck by the moralizing character of African films. Lacking a leading character or spokesman for the author, often it is a voice-over which plays the part of Coryphaeus. T. Aw, M. Thiame, O. Sembène, and authors of "political" films have used this device, especially in their early works. The process is not without a certain skill, and the voice-over acquires a certain dramatic force. It acts as a moral conscience which judges the acts of the protagonists. Deriving perhaps from the commentator in documentary films, it joins

the tradition of the *griots*.^{*} Of a lower caste and so insignificant and even scorned, the *griots* are singers, musicians, poets and flatterers. Since they are so insignificant, nothing can come from what they say which gives them great freedom to speak. They know that their message, when given, can be easily disavowed. They are not actors but witnesses. In the light of this it is normal that film-makers should use the *griots*, or at least allow their voices to be heard, without their being seen. The voice comments on and judges the action which is seen on the screen. It is a reflection (in all senses of the word) of the drama which is being played before the audience.

Modeled on African culture, these films do not seek to enhance personalities. There are no stars to excite the dreams of the public. The thoughts and feelings of the authors seem to disappear behind the story itself, and even this seems to blur off into a haze.

There are no heroes, no dominant characters around whom the various episodes can crystalize. This choice of a social or communal point of view rather than a personal one explains the repression of strong feelings, "passions," as the seventeenth century would have called them.

It rarely happens that the psychological behavior of one of the characters is studied, that his desires or interior monologues are described. Nevertheless madness and nightmares have been filmed.

Intense feelings are not sought; the individual characters are barely affirmed. Film-makers seem to forbid themselves the use of the psychological devices which give Western playwrights, novelists and film-makers their greatest source of power. Neither money, nor love, nor vengeance can be found in African films, and violence is not appreciated either.

Not that violence does not make money; the *karate* films have a solid following. But the "martial arts" are something other than pure violence, and even their name shows this. There is in them a kind of magic power which puts the hero in possession of an almost supernatural force. The audience knows this and strongly applauds these acrobatics where the "good

^{*} *griot*: sorcerer, witch-doctor. (Editor's note.)

guy” is never really in danger, much like the hero of a “western” who never misses his target. But this contemplation of an infallible hero who never really gives the viewer cause to worry for his safety is altogether different from dramatic tension born of a conflict.

To arrive at this, men must confront one another, and characters must be in unresolvable opposition. Violence of words or gestures is only a consequence of the opposition of strongly-drawn characters to any concession. This kind of clear-cut opposition is rare in African cinema. The rarity of shot-countershot editing bears this out. To film a discussion, a John Ford would photograph first one of the protagonists and then the other, opposing, at an increasingly rapid pace, the two images which appear in succession on the screen. Africans would never do something like this. Sometimes they line the two actors against a wall and photograph them head on; sometimes they use the two profiles, blending one into the other. Even if he does not notice it explicitly, the viewer will see two men side by side facing destiny, and not two rivals in confrontation.

The absence of explicit oppositions signified by the rarity of shot-countershot indicates that the violence of decisions or passions is always concealed or contained. This is not surprising in cultures where unanimity is sought, where certain decisions of justice and certain nominations to traditional functions require general agreement, even if the negotiations leading to this sometimes drag on for weeks. This helps also to understand elections where 95% of the voters choose the same candidate.

Eroticism is one of the ingredients of success which Africa has refused to adopt. Nude scenes can be counted on the fingers of one hand and bed scenes as well. Sembène in *Xala* is the author of one of them; the others occur in Gabonese films, a country where French influence has perhaps been stronger than elsewhere. Since 1978, however, an evolution has begun. Sexuality plays an important role in *Le Destin (Destiny)* in which a girl becomes pregnant by her teacher and is forced to leave her village. Her mother leaves with her, and both fall into prostitution. In *Bara*, another film from Mali, a crime of passion leads the culprit to cause another murder in order to cover himself. Until now sex did not play a large role in the black African

world. In certain regions virginity was not a cherished value, and it was normal for young people to have sexual relations before marriage. Certain customs even dictate that a man must furnish a female companion for a visiting friend who spends the night. Elsewhere, on the other hand, common practice required that the deflowering of a new bride be solemnly proven. Among many peoples adultery of the woman is considered as wrong, but it is a wrong against property rights and not an offense of jealous love.

Sexuality seemed associated with procreation and establishing descendants. Family concerns overrode all others, and the satisfaction of the partners was not an important element in this philosophy of love. Before expressing shock, Europeans of 1980 should recall that at the beginning of this century most marriages were "arranged" for economic reasons; dowries or possible increases in property holdings were more important than the feelings of the young couple. In Africa, where the community sense and patriarchal tendencies are well known, marriage law is based on the renewal of clans rather than on individual choices.

It is normal, then, that love is not the inevitable source of dramatic situations. As to eroticism, it is a useless spice when there is neither mystery nor repression. Up until a few years ago nudity was still the rule in large areas of the continent. A concern for dignity has led most governments to outlaw it. Until 1968 never had an African film-maker shown a nude. When Sembène photographed two nude scenes (in *Xala* and in *Ceddo*), they seemed to have a meaning, apparently erotic, apart from the uncivilized quality with which such scenes were characterized until then.

Will the refusal of eroticism be an enduring quality in African cinema or will the force of sexuality be strong enough to impose its expression?

Avarice, greed or privation are the motivating factors in the majority of European-American cinema showing the omnipotence of money in the modern world. There is nothing at all similar in African films, as an examination of their scenarios proves. There are no hidden treasures or bank robberies, but there are sometimes lies. Misery is not a constraint, and wealth is not an irresistible lure. However, money appears even more frequently than in

European films. Money is the instrument of prestige; it is given to friends, to *griots* or to beggars. Generosity is a capital virtue, and parasitism is accepted as one of its consequences. Financial independence is never of the supreme importance that it is in the West. One can live without money in a land where subsistence farming is the rule and where there is no shame in receiving presents or in allowing oneself to be fed in groups where community life is the norm.

For two centuries Europe has accepted that economic factors are the dominating ones or, more precisely, that a trading economy conditions the life of the State and of the individual. In a world of traditional peasants living from the produce of their own fields and their own craftsmanship, this was not the case except under excessive demographic pressure or agricultural catastrophes. We can understand, then, the manner of thinking of many Africans for whom money is not yet the central preoccupation. This is changing, however, now that each one seeks to acquire new things; the consumer society is setting in.

Societies described by African films are not societies without money or societies of primitive honesty, generosity or voluntary self-sacrifice. The authors frequently denounce lies and frauds. But all these evils do not seem to be taken too tragically.

Deprived of the mechanisms which enable European or American scenarios to function—greed and eroticism—the Africans construct films whose dramatic (in the etymological sense of action) character is weak. The absence of individualized heroes reinforces this tendency.

II. AFRICAN CULTURE AS SEEN IN FILMS

Cinema gives a complete testimony on African culture. Certainly Japanese or American films also express a culture. But reflected in the personality of John Ford or of Kurosawa, the prism of cultural values is transformed. As we said, authors in Africa seek to avoid the intrusion of personal elements. Not all succeed, of course, and the best allow their temperament to show through even if they try to repress it. This rejection of personal elements facilitates the analysis by the viewer of elements which reveal the culture.

Read through the scenario first of all: African culture is

described in the stories which are told. Of the 55 themes which Hoffner distinguishes (*Afrique littéraire*, N. 49), we see that questions of cultural and political identity are raised 105 times, social problems 137 times, rural-urban opposition 58 times, love and marriage 72 times, religion and magic rites 20 times, money 16 times.

But beyond these obvious themes clearly expressed, others arise which can only be vaguely sensed. In the films they have only secondary importance and serve only as embellishment. But they probably reveal secret preoccupations, like dreams or unconscious acts in the psychology of an individual.

Among these latent themes we should note the one of rural exodus. A certain number of films begin or conclude with an emigration. The device is practical for introducing a certain character or for separating groups whose differences are revealed by the scenario. But the use of this device is so frequent that we must go even further in an analysis of it. For a decade now Africa has experienced unprecedented demographic upheavals. The population has doubled with each generation since 1950, since the use of vaccinations, sulphur drugs and penicillin. Because of this demographic pressure, migrations are intense, mixing up ethnic groups, refashioning the political map, bringing new partners into the economic structure. Customs and beliefs are modified. The elderly who preserve tradition feel themselves threatened by abandon. The young sometimes sense that they are rushing into a cultural vacuum which Western civilization will fill, whatever its value. The drama is intense. In the Ivory Coast, a calm and relatively prosperous country in evident good health, there are at least 25% immigrants. No tradition or culture can withstand such a mixture. Africans often proclaim their attachment to village life; but in about ten years the rate of urbanization has doubled, and in the People's Republic of the Congo (Brazzaville) city-dwellers make up one third of the total population. The town-country opposition is often palpable.

Intercontinental migration is also evoked, although less frequently, becoming the central theme of those films in which it is treated. An essential thematic element is emigration to France, which is the basis for a whole series of political and economic films with a wide variety of treatment. Living clandestinely is

generally accepted. Far from being rejected, the exile suffers from feeling himself used as a “sexual object” (*Soleil O, Safrana*). The need of mutual assistance is frequently underlined, but certain authors show the deceptions possible in this (S. Sokhone, Ousséïni). The trip to Europe sometimes becomes a very secondary theme when characters are shown who return to their own country after studies or military service (*Sarzan, Cabascabo, Identité, Concerto, Woman with a Knife*). The questions then raised are those of cultural identity and of readaptation.

Migrations within the continent, logically enough, are more frequently described. These involve massive numbers of people who have, or who will have, enormous consequences on the countries which receive them and on the communities which they have left behind.

In general, protagonists are not obliged to leave under economic pressure except in two films, *Lettre paysanne* and *Kouami*. The city is frequently a refuge for pregnant girls (*Niaye, Le Destin*) or for a young man pursued by the wrath of the spirits (*Sous le signe du Vaudou*). It attracts by its modernity and by the liberty it offers (*Les Tam-tams se sont tus, Amanié*), but also by the ambitions it releases (*Abussuan*).

Another prominent theme is that of the state and relation to global society. Europeans sometimes believe that the concept of country cannot be of much importance in a region where borders are recent and where the desire “to live together” is weak and menaced by tribal hatreds or loyalties. Certainly the idea of country does not have the same emotional force that it had in nineteenth-century Europe; but when associated with the desire for racial dignity it provides cinema with an important theme. A small example shows this. In order to describe the two marriages of the hero of *Wanda entre l'eau et le feu*, the author, using a descending panorama, shows the flag of Mali flying above the city hall of Bamako, then enters the room to show the mayor wearing his sash in the national colors.

Already in studies of economic psychology it seemed to me that the state and associated concerns formed a frequent thematic ensemble. It could perhaps provide decisive material in programs of popular education. Flags, parades, uniforms and decorations show the unconscious presence in the minds of authors of a

“military” theme. Is it unreasonable to compare this phenomenon to the number of *coups d'état* which allow the army to seize power? A certain number of authors served in the French army (O. Ganda, Sembène). Allusions to the army are for them memories of their youth, and their films apparently use autobiographical details (*The Thundergod*, *Cabascabo*). But why did Sembène choose to picture the humiliation of his chauffeur by showing us the boot of a policeman crushing the war decoration which had fallen from his wallet? In *Niaye*, also by Sembène, an old retired soldier who has gone mad becomes the instrument of avenging fate and kills the incestuous village chief. *Sarzan*, as the title indicates, is the story of an old retired sergeant who wants to modernize his village, do away with rituals and fetishes and who is driven mad by the vengeful fates. A European officer gives the author of *Tam-tams*, Maury, the chance to evoke military camaraderie. In *Identité* soldiers fire at targets on masks. The animated cartoon *Bon Voyage Sim* contains a number of parades. To all these examples we should add those films where the army is the principal subject of the scenario (*L'Option*, *Hold-up à Kossou*, *Thundergod*).

Frequently it is said that tribalism is a threat to all African states, and the Africans themselves are concerned about this. An examination of the films does not confirm these fears. The more the village seems present, the more tribal racialism seems completely forgotten. *La rançon d'une alliance*, critical of a bygone past, even depicts vendettas between clans without evoking ethnic unities and their historical, linguistic or cultural components. Of course these films frequently use “traditional” dances to create transitions or suggest rituals, but the viewer never has the impression that a note of tribal nationalism is being sounded. In fact the authors are obviously city dwellers penetrated with modern culture and consequently beyond tradition.

Certain heroes look for tradition, but “the initiation to *iboga*” which gives Peter, in *Identité*, a vision of the world and of God is not a tribal institution. It is a syncretism which goes beyond the framework of the ancient tribes and enters the realm of universal religion. Perhaps because they do not know true ancestral traditions, film-makers appeal to a folklore stripped of the originality of tribal rites and string together scattered bits

from a variety of ethnic groups.

We cannot expect of cinema the same kind of revelations about beliefs or ancient customs which scientific ethnography might require. But films do bring together in a new form various elements. Not really traditions but elements which become credible simply because they are believed; perhaps these will provide the new myths which the culture in embryo needs. After all, what proves that the myths so seriously collected by ethnographers are not themselves actually recent formations of various combined ethnic traditions? What proves that the "tribes" whose names are catalogued by ethnographers are not simply provisional groupings? Are they really as deeply implanted as we might think? For some forty years in the cities, communities have formed around administrative districts. Artificial perhaps, these associations nevertheless form new bonds as respectable as any other. This process of unification is especially evident in forest zones where peoples and languages are infinitely splintered. Those who call themselves "lagoon people" in the Ivory Coast are an example. And so the cinematic theme of cultural identity replaces the tribal theme.

African cinema has made a choice among available genres, and this choice of certain directors is in itself significant. The comic genre has been almost totally rejected. The cinematic historian who compares the nascent African production to early European production will be amazed. From the beginning, cinema found a place at country fairs where it presented farces and slapstick comedies. African cinema has only produced one comic film of this kind up until now, *Amanié*, a 1972 film from the Ivory Coast. This deliberate choice should give pause to whites who often think that joyous good humor characterizes Africans. Rather than joy, laughter in Africa frequently disguises a feeling of embarrassment or anxiety. To be convinced of this it suffices to have heard Ganda, in *Saitane*, whose laughing is more like braying.

In France, Italy or the United States great historical panoramas have furnished material for numerous films from *Birth of a Nation* to *La Mort du Duc de Guise*. History and the historical epic have hardly inspired African film-makers. A Congolese film, *La Rançon d'une alliance*, tries hard to describe ancient times, and the author

has attempted to set his film without anachronisms. A Nigerian, M. Alassane, reinvents all genres. Along with a western and an animated cartoon, he composed a cartoon film, *Samba Gana*, on the historic myths of his country, before illustrating the legend of the girl sacrificed to the water spirit in *Toula*, a German-Nigerian Co-production. Sembène's *Ceddo* could be considered a historical film even though considerable liberties were taken with scientific history. The many examples of newly-gained independence and concern for cultural identity might have led us to look for an interest in history and a search for the past, but this is quite remote and uneasy in present political configurations. Moreover civilizations based on ancestor worship are rarely favorable to the idea of historic evolution. Everyone pretends to model his conduct on the past, and change or evolution is rejected as ungodly.

Adventure films are quite rare, which is not surprising since the use of violence in films is badly received, as we have already seen. There is hardly ever a psychological drama as a consequence of the mistrust of individualism. The dominant genre is the social drama or the social comedy. This choice is understandable in that authors have decided to be educators of their people. To describe the wrongs of a society and to attempt to resolve them is perfectly in accordance with these genres.

Many Africans are deeply involved in music and dance, and yet the musical comedy has never tempted an African author. The rejection of this genre seems once more to indicate a desire for the serious.

Film-makers who emigrated to France have all chosen political films as expression. This is easily understood; wanting to show the common problems of their compatriots, they had to broach the subject of the situation of the emigrant. In their films, however, the authors have not all followed the same directions. In a work on black film-makers, Hennebelle questions African authors and records their answers. Although the questions were obviously leading, many authors did not follow the direction of the questioner who wanted them to denounce imperialism, colonialism, etc. Sembène had already said that he was tired of "placard cinema." Others noted that to set up a comparison of black brotherhood in face of white suppression would be a

caricature. Still others stated that it is urgent to analyze what is wrong with black society.

Due to poverty of means or perhaps intentional simplicity, African authors seldom use elaborately constructed sets; they prefer natural settings which allow the foreign viewer to become familiar with the scenery. Not that film-makers pay particular attention to it, for it is rare that the camera pauses to describe a landscape. It is important to stress the small number of occasions where there is an over-all shot of characters in a natural setting, like in a western, where rivers and mountains enhance the epic quality of a cavalry charge or dangerous journeys. Appreciation for nature is not common in Africa. The bush is an unhumanized world peopled with spirits who, it is frequently thought, must be appeased. In *Saïtane* the magician goes crazy because he believed the trees were responding to his ritual salutations. Wild animals are present, but only in cages of zoos: at Bamako in *Namba* or at Niamey in *Saïtane*. Only once do we see them free, the giraffes mixed in with a herd of cows who flee before the wild, purposeless stampede of the false cowboys of *Retour de l'aventurier*.

In a Gabonese film, however, the hero makes a long journey crossing a river similar to the one in *Pierrot le fou*. Here it should be noted that Gabon is strongly marked by Western influence and that its cinema shows this clearly with its relative eroticism and its treatment of questions of cultural identity.

The river, or water in general, is the natural element most frequently shown, very often connected with feminine symbols which would have delighted Jung. The tree, filmed in ascending or descending panorama, provides punctuation marks or symbols of exaltation. Coupled with the rising or setting sun, it allows an indication of the passage of time, a means of opposing the temporary to the permanent.

The director does not perhaps offer the viewer that vision of nature which he would like: powerful rivers, enormous trees, frightening forests, monotonous solitudes. But he offers instead something even more valuable, his testimony as man with regard to the world. Nature is rarely present, first because the film-maker, with few exceptions, is an urbanite, a son of the city; and second because nature is sacred and disturbing since it is not tamed.

Perhaps we should look even further. In the Middle Ages monuments existed on their own without the benefit of a setting, a large square in front, or a broad avenue to give the viewer perspective.

In painting, outdoor space was long absent and only rediscovered and used in those imaginary landscapes which appear in the backgrounds of pictures. The outdoors remained foreign to ordinary painting—houses with their closed inner shutters or stained glass which do not permit a view of the street. The narrowness of the street, in any case, would not make any such opening very pleasant. Were our ancestors myopic with no distant horizons? African cinema seems to have adopted this attitude. Landscape, a product of the nineteenth century and the Venetian *vedutisti*, is not sought after, and when it occurs the viewer perceives it as a rough image unenlivened by selection or embellishment on the part of the author.

Rarely are sets constructed. The meagerness of the traditional huts or of the slum dwellings makes it difficult to film a sequence in them. With only a few rare exceptions such as *Muna Moto* or *Le Mandat*, the viewer seldom sees the interior of poor dwellings. On the other hand *bourgeois* houses are filmed, showing, by their decoration, the African qualities of the character or of the director. This affirmation of identity sometimes seems too forced to be natural, too exclusively political to be profound. For example, pinned to the wall in front of the desk where the student is working are photos of “committed” politicians from Mao to Sékou Touré, or a map of Africa hangs on the businessman’s door. On walls or shelves are traditional masks or statuettes. The authors did not pay close enough attention to the fact that they were merely sketching facades of men, and not entering into the souls of their characters. When Jean Renoir introduces us to the commander of a prison camp, played by Eric von Stroheim, he uses such devices to bring us in contact with the psychology of the character. Beyond his official role as military man and sophisticated aristocrat, he lets us guess at the sentimentalism of the black gloves and the souvenir champagne cork.

Here the sets are silent, overcome by the stifling eloquence of their Africanness. We see only what the author of a study of African students discovered: that their conversations were es-

entially political and that their nostalgia was for the village community and not for the person of a father, a mother or the family from which they were separated. The students were not looking for personal expression, maybe even avoiding such and replacing it with a stereotyped political expression. Europeans do the same thing when they avoid honest and deep relations by talking about the weather or about sports.

Is cinema, as it is sometimes said, the art that bends time to the will of man? African film-makers have not invented new means of expressing time, but the originality of the context leads the viewer to reflect on the subject. Time in European films is individual time, time in the life of the hero. In African films it more frequently is cultural time, bound to the ancient tradition which is sought anew. A movement through space permits the resolution of the problem. Returning to the "village," heroes flee modern times and regain that time which remains the golden age, the time of the ancestors whose way of life is thought to be perpetuated among rural peoples. In various films the cinematic action is only an empty parenthesis. At the end the characters, unchanged, take up once more their life of the past, forgetting the events which have just occurred. Everything happens in a cyclical time where life continually repeats itself with few changes. In other films, time seems to be a linear movement, but alongside the world here below is juxtaposed an invisible world, a world of spirits (*On the Bank of Solitude*), of dreams, or of madness which has its own reality.

Whether the golden age is past, the future is a generator of progress or time is measured only in everlasting rebeginnings, African cinema is true to its own spirit by leading the viewer away from his individualist preoccupations and by thrusting him into a temporal movement which goes beyond anecdote to attain the time of cultural history.

Even if its over-all contribution to the cinematic medium is still limited, Africa offers film-makers the example of certain renunciations.

It is possible to make films without having recourse to violence, eroticism or the exaltation of the individual. Certainly the in-

tensity of the action suffers from this self-discipline and especially from the lack of a hero, a principal character around whom classical cinema arranges everything. The themes which Africa treats are not bound to the self-expression of the author; film-makers wish to serve their people. Through their films we can discern the outline of African society with its fears and its hopes.

After more than 60 years of evolution, international cinema has defined the genres within which, up until the last few years, film-making felt comfortable. A certain unease is now appearing in cinema as well as in the novel, and since *Marienbad* perhaps neither authors nor the public know exactly how to proceed. African production could help revise these ideas by giving the example of a cinema where films do not follow classic patterns.

For a long time cinema fans have tried to make out the personality of authors, perhaps thereby encouraging an excessive sophistication. Refusing a too-confining system and by seeking to be educators of the people, authors can incite world cinema to a certain return to freshness.