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Review Essay

Contemporary Cinema of Africa and the Diaspora

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By ANJALI PRABHU

Wiley Blackwell, 2014, 261pp.

What does “Africa Watch”? Anjali Prabhu begins her study of contemporary African and African diasporic cinema with a bold proposition: to watch films through an “Africanized perspective.” (1) Questions of decolonizing the “gaze,” spectatorship, and popular viewership have long preoccupied discussions of African cinema. Prabhu’s intention, however, is not to offer a historically situated and experiential account of spectatorship in the African continent but rather to provide a theoretical analysis of the spectator-positioning demanded by African cinema. For Prabhu, African cinema requires “of the spectator an interactivity and emotive and intellectual engagement that transports and transposes questions of Africa into his or her very own subjectivity.” (12) The question thus becomes less what does “Africa” watch and more what should Africa, and those outside the continent, watch in order to be “Africanized.” Prabhu presents “Africa” not as a narrowly defined geographical or political appellation but as a form of engagement.

The study is structured in three parts, each examining a particular formal principle. Part One examines the construction of space and the making of the postcolonial city, first through a close textual analysis of *The Cathedral*, a 2006 film from Mauritian filmmaker Harrikrishna Anenden, and second through a more intertextual examination of the urban African subject in films ranging from Ousmane Sembène’s classic *La Noire De . . .* to more recent fare, from South Africa’s *Tsotsi* to Morocco’s *Casanegra*. Although the argument of the “Africanization” of space is not necessarily new, it is here that Prabhu’s analysis is at its strongest, offering a vivid and richly detailed account of the variety and complexity of African cinematic engagements with urban spaces—through genre, camera movement, and framing—as sites of post-colonial contradiction, dissonance, and irony.

Part Two tackles the question of character, developing gendered arguments around the making of postcolonial subjectivities and “revolutionary personhood.” In Chapter 4, Prabhu extends her previously published argument on the “monumentalization” of the female heroine in Ramaka’s *Karmen Gëi*; one wonders, though, if this argument, and its attempt to elide the “male gaze” in postcolonial African cinema, is actually fetishization in different theoretical clothes. Prabhu’s subsequent analysis of Moufida Tlatli’s *The Silences of the Palaces* provides a slight

redress, offering the opportunity to engage more directly with feminist theories and the intersectionalities of gender, class, nationalism, and the everyday in postcolonial Tunisia. Focus then shifts to representations of masculinity and the heroic ideal in Sembène's *Xala* and Zézé Gamboa's *O Heroi*. Here again, though, the crisis of masculinity reflected in these films is left undeveloped. Finally, Prabhu returns to *Tsotsi* to explore the making of "revolutionary personhood" through the uncomfortable positioning of the spectator in aesthetic and ethical alignment with the African subject.

Part Three explores narrative form, drawing out the particularly rich tradition of experimental documentary in African cinema. The bulk of this section examines the work of two filmmakers, Raoul Peck and Jean Marie Teno. For both, the particular relationship of sound to image allows for the elaboration not just of style but also of method, offering searing critiques of colonial claims on knowledge production and opportunities to "Africanize" the spectator through self-reflexivity and personalized narration.

To conclude, Prabhu offers a provocative, if not entirely convincing, comparison of the "Africanizing" potentials of two films: Edward Zwick's *Blood Diamond* and Abderrahmane Sissako's *Bamako*. Framed through a recasting of Binyavanga Wainaina's famous satirical piece "How to Write about Africa," Prabhu uses this comparison to argue against the reductive "inside/outside" treatment of representations of Africa. Prabhu reads Zwick's film as part of this "Africanizing" discourse, despite its blockbuster status and white male lead. Although foreign-made, Prabhu argues that *Blood Diamond* manages to go beyond stereotyped representations of conflict on the continent and to balance historical specificity with universally sympathetic characters. Sissako's *Bamako* is then read in a similar vein, though lauded as taking this process a step further and offering a more intimate and uncomfortable spectatorial experience in the space of an African courtyard. *Bamako* delivers an ideologically explicit critique of global economic systems through its mock trial between international monetary funding bodies and the "African" people. But through careful staging, aesthetic sophistication, and playful, satirical references, Sissako further "enlivens in his spectator a radical awareness that extends well beyond the drama." (228)

While problematizing the dichotomy of "inside/outside" productions of "Africanized" spectatorship, the points of comparison between these two films, beyond both being released in 2006, are left indecipherable. The reading of *Blood Diamond* is unpersuasive: presenting sympathetic African characters is not the same thing as encouraging "Africanized" perspectives; showing Sierra Leone on a map does little to differentiate the generalized "African" space that Prabhu claims Zwick successfully avoids; and privileging the white male gaze as central to the construction of agency—whether good or bad—and action in the film certainly limits the complexity and development of the film's African characters. A more productive comparison for *Blood Diamond* might have been illuminated by Newton Aduaka's 2007 film *Ezra*, a film that delves into similar questions of resources, violence, agency, and family in Sierra Leone though through a radically different perspective.¹

1 Iyunolu Osagie has recently undertaken just such a comparison in Mary Ellen Higgins's edited text *Hollywood's Africa after 1994* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2012).

Pegged at an accessible level, this study invites readers to embark on a “journey of dialogue, interrogation, and pleasure.” (233) Prabhu’s lively and at times informal narrative tone will appeal to many students. For specialists, however, the study fails to fulfill its theoretical promises and engages inconsistently, and at times contradictorily, with other scholarship in the field.

The majority of the text focuses on well-trodden ground, favoring the canonical works of Sembène, Teno, and Peck, and rehashing by now dated debates over the decolonization of the “gaze” and the “Africanization” of form and content. “Africanization” itself was a much broader political, economic, and cultural project in the decades following the 1960s, and the early pioneering African film scholarship of Ukadike, Bartlet, Diawara, Stam and Shohat, and Tomaselli, among countless other postcolonial scholars who have examined these historical developments in other popular arts, produced critical contributions to these debates. These authors elaborated theories inspired by the tenets of Third Cinema around the “politics of aesthetics” and the role of film in the unfinished project of decolonization while also at times falling back on more static and romanticized notions of the “oral” and the reclamation of an “authentic” African past in problematic ways.² As Lindiwe Dovey argued back in 2010, quoting Kenneth Harrow, “African Cinema scholarship has allowed itself to become trapped in ‘old, tired formulas deployed in justification of filmmaking practices that have not substantially changes in forty years.’ ”³

Prabhu fails both to contextualize these historiographical and theoretical shifts and to engage with the interventions and innovations of the “new generation” of African filmmakers that she flags at several points in the text. Filmmakers the likes of Djo Munga, Alain Gomis, Wanuri Kahiu, Akin Omotoso (whose name is misspelled in the text), Khalo Matabane, Andrew Dosunmu, and Dyana Gaye, among others, are either mentioned only in passing or not at all, leaving the promise of exploring the new directions and connectivities in African and diasporic cinema unfulfilled. Several potentially important theoretical interventions—around subjectivities, urbanization, gender and sexuality, migration, and exilic identities—are thus left underdeveloped. To provide one striking example, this newer “wave” in African filmmaking, which includes younger filmmakers like those previously listed as well as more established filmmakers the likes of Bekolo, Haroun, and Sissako, offers a distinct departure from the Sembènian or Teno-esque approach to building the collective, and overtly politicized, spectatorship that Prabhu rightly elaborates, through their narrative and aesthetic privileging of what might be characterized as radical interiority in more recent films.⁴

This new wave also works to blur the line between what Prabhu avowedly highlights as “art house” cinema and more commercial or popular cinematic

2 For a comprehensive bibliography of such work and later works (including by some of the same authors) that have challenged these early studies, see <http://www.ascleiden.nl/content/webdossiers/african-cinema> and <http://www.ascleiden.nl/content/webdossiers/african-cinema-ii>.

3 For more on the “dated” nature of these debates, see Lindiwe Dovey, “African Film and Video: Pleasure, Politics, Performance,” *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 22.1 (June 2010): 1.

4 For a similar argument, see Manthia Diawara, *African Film: New Forms of Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Prestel, 2010). For a film series that highlighted these new trends, see <http://thecinematheque.ca/the-new-wave-in-african-cinema>.

productions—an opposition that many contemporarily argue makes little sense.⁵ Indeed, at one point, Prabhu goes as far as to claim that “African cinema distances itself from commercial forms of cinema,” (134) a claim presented as a form of postcolonial resistance (that many African filmmakers today would surely find outmoded, especially with recent shifts in funding partnerships, genre crossovers, and new distribution models)⁶ and sustainable only if one jettisons the majority of films made in the continent from this restrictive definition of “African” cinema.

Indeed, this dismissal of African cinematic tastes, popular forms, and new aesthetic dispositions leads Prabhu to make the audacious, and unsettling, claim that “fewer Africans are interested (or think they are interested) in being Africanized than in watching Nollywood films.” (229) While providing narrative flair, provocative formal analysis, and a capable introduction to a variety of African filmmaking traditions, this study’s theoretical claim to an “Africanized” spectator risks reproducing and reifying, even if in inverted form, colonial assumptions and impositions of what should be watched as “African.”

5 Dovey, “African Film and Video: Pleasure, Politics, Performance,” 2, 4. For a fuller discussion of this relationship, see the special issue of *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 22.1 on African screen media. See also Jonathan Haynes, “African Cinema and Nollywood,” *Situations: Project of the Radical Imagination* 4. 1 (2011): 67–90, which Prabhu critiques in her treatment of *Bamako* but fails to address in terms of the assumptions made about African filmmakers and their audiences in relation to the “commercial.”

6 See, for example, Akin Omotoso’s recent critique of South African distribution practices: <http://africasacountry.com/2016/02/movienight2/>.