

LANGUAGE, LITERATURE, AND THE ARTS

Kenneth W. Harrow. *Trash: African Cinema from Below*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013. ix + 344 pp. Photographs. Filmography. Bibliography. Index. \$25.00. Paper.

“The trash was always there, only we never noticed it,” reads the first line of Kenneth Harrow’s latest study of African cinema, *Trash: African Cinema from Below*. Harrow’s engaging book offers readers a glimpse into the trash heaps, human waste dumps, squalor, and poverty that have often been depicted in African cinema since independence, but which have rarely been the object of critical study. The sociopolitical, historical, and artistic themes that can be associated with trash—or trashiness, or “*les déchets humains*,” as Sembene Ousmane’s famous film *Xala* (1975) depicts them—have for too long been discounted as critical points of study in the cinematic oeuvre of leading filmmakers across the continent. Harrow’s book seeks to fill in this gap in scholarship by presenting an innovative and untraditional way of looking at African film.

The author emphasizes that African cinema has undergone a transformation and should be considered as a “recovered” (*récupéré*) art demonstrating new forms and themes that posit essential humanist questions of our era (282). He proposes taking African cinema out of the critical discursive framework of the aesthetical and/or postcolonial and their typical topics—revolution/struggle/protest, social-realist, *engagé*—in order to look at the art in terms of how it is enmeshed in the socioeconomic global systems of the contemporary era, as a product to be consumed: “Trash is a stage in the trajectory attached to objects of worth in the economies of value, the economics of trash” (2). This is not to reduce African cinema to the label of “trash,” but rather to study what it shows about the developing world, the sociopolitical, environmental, cultural, and historical challenges that have faced and are facing the continent.

One of the most powerful transformations of African film in the last twenty years is the proliferation of Nollywood films. The Nollywood phenomenon’s success is rooted in its ability to offer trashy themes while making relative the aesthetics of a new art form: “Nollywood is not the answer to trash: it is the answer to African culture’s quest for a viable economic basis that rests upon an African audience and its taste” (60). Nollywood has succeeded in refashioning the Seventh Art into a consumed and commoditized product as it changes “the formulae” of what an African film is and should be. Films such as *Osuofia in London* (2003) and *L’assujetti* (1999) have generated mass audience appeal both in and outside the continent. Harrow comments that “African politics drove the issues depicted in African films until Nollywood [came along],” making it obsolete to think of art and politics as mutually exclusive. Before the commodification and consumption of Nollywood film, “art and politics remained at loggerheads” (31). African film was only allowed to address the “exigencies”

of the continent that “were frozen [in] terms of aesthetics and political commitment,” bending to the dualist “commercial versus serious cinema” way of thinking about African cinema production (31). In the face of rising costs, limited systems of distribution, and the closing of cinema houses all over Africa, Nollywood has succeeded in creating, out of trash, a new art form that is lucrative and appealing. So what does this say about African cinema, “high” and “low” art, and indeed all films produced and consumed in the global marketplace? This question is a defining one addressed throughout Harrow’s work.

Trash contains twelve chapters, spanning theories about the socioeconomic and global impact of trash on Africa and how it is represented in film. Harrow analyzes a variety of different films from the continent and the diaspora that take up these issues, emphasizing the many forms—from the metaphorical to the symbolic—that “trash” can take. *Trash* builds on Harrow’s *Postcolonial African Cinema: From Political Engagement to Postmodernism* (Indiana, 2007) in which he states, “It is time for a revolution in African film criticism. A revolution against the old tired formulas deployed in justification of filmmaking practices that have not substantially changed in forty years. Time for new voices, a new paradigm, a new view—a new Aristotle to invent the poetics we need for today” (xi). Careful not to label trash as a sign or a product of “victimhood,” associated with the “typically African” or the “typically impoverished,” Harrow, in regard to films such as Sissako’s *Bamako* (2006), Gamboa’s *O’Herói* (2004), and Ramaka’s *Karmen Gei* (2001), defines African cinema as pointing to where we can and should make connections globally in order to “focus on what we hold in common, what we consider of public concern . . . and subject to public discourse” (35). Drawing on social theories and philosophies of film proposed by scholars such as Georges Bataille (*Visions of Excess* [Minnesota, 1985]), Robert Stam (“Beyond Third Cinema: The Aesthetics of Hybridity” in *Rethinking Third Cinema*, edited by A. Guneratne and W. Dissanayake [Routledge, 2003]), Jacques Rancière (*Aesthetics and Its Discontents* [Polity, 2009]), and Julia Kristeva (*Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* [Columbia, 1982]), Harrow makes the case for taking African cinema out of its usual realms of scholarly inquiry, centered in the artistic and aesthetic, in order to see how art and politics intersect “from below.” For example, he privileges thinking of *Bamako* not only in terms of what it says about “the debt crushing Africa as the result of World Bank policies that serve the interests of the wealthy powers and continue the exploitation of the continent,” but also in terms of what statements the film makes about global systems of capitalist exploitation (177). These systems are affecting not only Mali but also countries across the world where commodities and issues such as “rice, coffee, cacao, along with diamonds, cotton, tin, lumber, as well as clandestine emigration, the failure of the state, corruption, privatization, and neoliberalism, and the consequential misery, low life expectancy, poor health and education, lack of decent water, food, and so on” are stressing the societies in which most of the globe’s populations live (177–78).

“*Déchets humains* [are] weighty artifices of power” (47), says Harrow. He is quick to point out that *trash-izing* African cinema does not mean “a dismissal of the old”; it is rather an attempt to “reconstitute politics, like art, in a location that stands apart from that constructed by the old order’s terms” (47). This old order has often depended on Western notions and conceptions of what African film should give us, rather than what it truly desires to show. Trash floats, is transported, blows in the wind, and settles everywhere. The continent is not a hermetically sealed trash bin where themes of abjection are the only ones allowed. As stated above, Harrow makes a point of indicating to readers that trash is not uniquely African. Taking this idea to heart, the author includes in his study the African American filmmaker Kimberly Rivers’s *Trouble the Water* (2008) about the horrors of hurricane Katrina in 2005. A former drug addict, Rivers herself is a product of the discarded, yet with a twenty-dollar camera she was able to make a film that “calls for social change and activism based on seeing and understanding the world through the eyes and experiences of oppressed women—women treated like trash and called trashy” (170). This global perspective allows us to “go beyond the initial impulse of imperfect cinema to articulate a dialectic originating from below” (176). Harrow’s work shows us that Sembene’s *déchets humains* are not just found on one continent because the problems of trash, poverty, and marginalization are not uniquely African.

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MEMOIRS AND BIOGRAPHY

Roland Minor. *A Lot of Loose Ends: A Vet in Africa*. Cirencester, U.K.: Memoirs Publishing, 2013. 368 pp. Maps. Photographs. Bibliography. Index. £14.00. Paper.

Maintaining the health of flocks and herds in the marginal rangelands of the Greater Horn of Africa has taken on a wider significance in recent years as catastrophic loss of livestock to drought and disease inevitably compromises societal reproduction and creates in the process a fertile recruiting ground for international terrorism. Roland Minor is a Cambridge-educated veterinarian whose career since 1963, spent mainly in this region, has encompassed the postcolonial continuities of Uganda’s reasonably efficient if somewhat thinly spread state veterinary service and the project-based intervention of the international development industry in Ethiopia and Sudan. Although written in an anecdotal style for a more general readership, this engaging and well-written autobiographical account of over forty years of wide-ranging service in the field nevertheless contains useful insights into