

REVIEWS OF BOOKS

VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS IN AND OF AFRICA:
A REVIEW OF THREE BOOKS

JAMES E. GENOVA, *Cinema and Development in West Africa*. Bloomington and Indianapolis IN: Indiana University Press (hb US\$70 – 978 0 253 01002 5; pb US\$25 – 978 0 253 01008 7). 2013, 222 pp.

NIGEL ELTRINGHAM, editor, *Framing Africa: portrayals of a continent in contemporary mainstream cinema*. New York NY and Oxford: Berghahn Books (hb US\$120/£75 – 978 1 78238 073 3). 2013, 176 pp.

LIZELLE BISSCHOFF and STEFANIE VAN DE PEER, editors, *Art and Trauma in Africa: representations of reconciliation in music, visual arts, literature and film*. London and New York NY: I. B. Tauris (hb £68 – 978 1 84885 692 9). 2013, 216 pp.

Africa plays an important role in cultural representation, both as a site of visual production and as a locus of resonant yet often stereotypical visual images. The three books under review here illustrate the different ways in which the continent is narrated in various media, and especially in film. They also illuminate the different methodologies and approaches employed by scholars in the analysis of visual representations of and from Africa.

Cinema and Development in West Africa examines ‘the struggle by early African filmmakers to found a truly independent African cinema that would simultaneously contribute to the cultural renaissance of Africa’s peoples and play a central role in postcolonial development’ (p. 2) in a political and historical context where African states needed to quickly determine sectors that could secure the continent’s political, cultural and economic development. It highlights the importance of colonial policy in shaping film history, and explores the importance of the material infrastructure of film production.

The book consists of five chapters. After a well-crafted introduction that efficiently sets out the goals and the methodological framework, the first chapter examines the ‘structural aspects of the cinema industrial complex as it took shape in the late imperial era’ (p. 21). It was in these circumstances that the French empire not only took total control of the infrastructural and distributional aspects of the industry, but also made sure that the content of the films was monitored closely. The second chapter examines the importance for African cinema of French film policy, which was rooted in the idea that ‘films had real-world consequences’ and could therefore constitute a threat to French rule (p. 56). Drawing on the work of Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, Chapter 3 explores ‘the strategic counterhegemonic film politics’ of the early colonial period (pp. 70–1). Genova argues that the ‘film politics that dominated cinematic practice in the late colonial era had to be explicitly referenced and combated if any alternative tradition of motion picture production was going to be possible in west Africa’ (p. 73). Here, Genova’s emphasis on the contribution of filmmaker Paulin Soumanou Vieyra to the nationalist and ideological thrust of early African film practice is very useful. The next chapter discusses ‘the story of Francophone West African filmmakers’ efforts to found an African cinema aesthetic rooted in their experiences *that would change the global field of motion*

picture production' (p. 97, emphasis added). Looking at the works of Ousmane Sembène and Med Hondo as well as that of Vieyra, the author further develops his analysis of the nationalist trend that defined African cinema for decades and offers a refreshing reading of the work of Djibril Diop Mambéty, who took African film aesthetics to an unprecedented level of complexity. The final chapter explores areas not addressed by current cinema scholarship. While the prominent role of France in financing early West African film production has been noted by many scholars, 'few have offered a detailed account of the ways in which the former metropole assiduously sought to perpetuate the fundamental structures of the colonial-era cinema industrial complex in their entirety' (p. 131). Genova's focus on material culture is an important addition to the often exclusively postmodern (Harrow), ideological (Ukadike) or sociological (Diawara) readings that have informed other studies in the discipline.

Overall, *Cinema and Development in West Africa* is a welcome addition to cinema scholarship. While one may question the author's obsession with periodization, his historical approach illuminates the enduring importance of political and economic dynamics not yet fully explored in the study of African cinema. Genova's book is a useful contribution to the vast and growing field of African cinema.

Exploring the relationship between Africa and cinema from a different point of view, *Framing Africa* is a compilation of seven chapters on various representations of Africa in contemporary Western cinema. It examines the ways in which contemporary mainstream cinema represents Africa, and it also highlights the issues – from politics to healthcare, anthropology and sport – on which such representations focus.

In the introduction, Nigel Eltringham sets out the main argument of the book: that Hollywood movies usually stereotype Africa as a place of violence; at best, Africa is a jungle in desperate need of being saved by the first colonizer. This is an underlying topic for most of the book's chapters. Mark Leopold examines the relationships between the mythology (and mythologies) about Idi Amin Dada presented in the film *The Last King of Scotland* and the 'reality' of his rule. He also points to misleading cultural representations and historical inaccuracies in the film's plot that uninformed viewers might not be able to identify. In the conclusion, Leopold illustrates the complexities of Africa's representation in the film by suggesting that what makes the film misleading is not that it is 'wrong' but that it is mythical, where myth is neither truth nor fiction. Myth also plays a powerful role in Lidwien Kapteijns' 'Black Hawk Down: recasting U.S. military history at Somali expense'. It is well known that the US-led intervention in Somalia was a disaster that wounded America's military pride; Kapteijns describes filmic strategies that represent US military practice as superior to that of Somalis, irrespective of victory, in addition to reproducing negative stereotypes about the Other throughout. A different approach, focusing on medical data, informs Daniel Branch's discussion of health, corruption and contemporary Kenya in *The Constant Gardener*. But while it is clear that the film explores known governance flaws with regard to medical provision and drug testing, one is left to wonder why so little space is given to actual film analysis.

Blood Diamond is one of the most popular mainstream films to establish the link between wealth, corruption and violence in Africa. Exploring the representation of violence in this film about the Sierra Leone war, Danny Hoffman explores how *Blood Diamond* represents the complex relationship between rural and urban spaces, through the movement of the camera, suggesting that it is less a story about the conflict's history than a stock of images stereotyping the African city as a hopeless place. Hopelessness certainly prevailed in Rwanda

after the 1994 genocide. In his discussion of *Shooting Dogs* and *Hotel Rwanda*, Nigel Eltringham asks about the representability and the imaginability of genocidal massacres. Although the two main films to be analysed engage with Rwandan history, Eltringham relates them to other films on the subject of genocide. In this context, the author reflects on the explanation by *Shooting Dogs* director Michael Caton-Jones that he chose non-African lead characters because he was telling the genocide story to a Western audience: the absence of key African characters, reminiscent of early colonial films, presents the genocide in a way that would be unacceptable in non-African contexts.

The two last chapters focus on South Africa. Annelies Verdoolaege's chapter on *Red Dust* summarizes the history and shortcomings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and explores three themes relevant to the violent and discriminatory context of apartheid South Africa: torture, betrayal and forgiveness. Verdoolaege uses parallels between the movie characters and real-life testimonies to conclude that *Red Dust* does not reflect sufficiently on what the TRC meant for the post-apartheid nation of South Africa. In 'Go *Amabokoboko!*: rugby, race, Madiba and the *Invictus* creation myth of a new South Africa', Derek Charles Catsam begins with a brief history of the Springboks, the national rugby team of South Africa, in order to illustrate the historical role of this sport as a bastion of Afrikaner agency, which, however, was turned into a potential symbol of national unity through Nelson Mandela's support. As the film suggests that this implies an end to South African racism, this contribution could be improved by clarifying to what degree *Invictus* is a (non-)reflection of South African realities and what exactly the myth in the title is about.

Moving beyond the production of art in the context of the colonial experience or through Hollywood representations, *Art and Trauma in Africa* explores the place of art in dealing with trauma. While the contributors to this volume understand conflicts and trauma as part of the African experience, they explore music, visual arts, literature and film by focusing on the transformative 'power of art through creation and experience' (p. 13).

In the first chapter, Albert O. Oikelome discusses the place of hip hop music in the restive environment of the Niger Delta. Some songs are translated into English and their analysis illustrates how this popular cultural genre can be openly political and express anger towards government. The next chapter, 'Grooving on broken: dancing war trauma in Angolan Kuduro', explains that Kuduro is intimately related to Angola's nationalist and civil war experience as a musical genre, social phenomenon and choreographic practice. As such, Kuduro remains 'a re-enactment of traumatic experiences and thus a tool to maintain collective homeostasis in a post-war context' (p. 57). In the following chapter, Moulay Driss El Maarouf elucidates how music festivals encourage positive attitudes among young people, because music serves a 'reconciliatory purpose as its moves from the cultural to the political' (p. 69). In Morocco, terrorist attacks have offered the state a unique enemy against which the entire country can rally easily, without questioning the autocratic monarchy that has been governing with a heavy hand for centuries. Culture, celebration and entertainment mobilize emotions and offer a unique 'possibility to attend a transcendental feeling of togetherness and community' (p. 74).

In 'Transforming arms into ploughshares: weapons that destroy and heal in Mozambican urban art', several pieces of art by different artists, illustrated in photographs, are analysed and show the importance of the *Transformação de Armas em Enxadas* project in creating and imagining a peaceful future for Mozambique and neighbouring Angola. 'Unlocking the doors of Number Four

prison: curating the violent past in contemporary South Africa' uses photographs to show the current status of the prison as a museum. The selected photographs help give a face to a new and unexpected site of cultural production that helps in 'confronting the challenges of the post-apartheid era' (p. 127). 'Imaging life after death: photography and the 1994 genocide in Rwanda' discusses the representation of genocide through photographs of survivors, which are hence freed from the clichés of victimhood. Although only one artist is mentioned, the chapter describes other examples of the use of photography by genocide survivors that challenge the work of professional – and especially journalistic – photographs of the genocide. Frank Möller and Rafiki Ubaldo show that 'art can make a small but important contribution to building a functioning political community in Rwanda' (p. 147).

"'It was a terrible time to be alive': narrative reconciliation in contemporary West African fiction' discusses the social conflicts and the misery of everyday life observed in novels. While the contributor admits that '[t]he task of the novelist is to create a plot that is sufficiently powerful to effect compassion and emotional involvement, and yet not so painful to provoke the reader to dismiss the artistic mediation of traumatic and tantalising experiences' (p. 156), it is not clear exactly how this is done in novels such as Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* and Benjamin Kwakye's *The Sun by Night*. 'Truth will set you free: implications of a creative narrative for the "official" discourse of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission' illustrates why the official narratives of the TRC are not enough for forgiveness and reconciliation. A play and a fictional memoir are carefully analysed in order to provide a deeper understanding of truth-telling processes that contrast with the TRC's mobilization of truth as 'performing a defined role as a tool to create conditions of reconciliation and nation-building' (p. 174). 'Re-fathoming the dark of heartness: contrapuntal representations of the Rwandan genocide' is another contribution on the representability of a genocide and discusses two texts by a non-Rwandan and a Rwandan writer. It poses the question not only of the validity of the representation, but also of its legitimacy.

In 'Reconciling the African nation: Fanta Regina Nacro's *La Nuit de la Vérité*', Lizelle Bisschoff examines the ways in which fiction can express 'truth' in a context where African atrocities are 'exploited' to entertain Western audiences or, 'at best, ... to raise awareness of African issues' (p. 224). In contrast, and focusing on female as well as male agency, Nacro's film intertwines the histories of family and nation, where 'inter-ethnic and intra-national conflicts are played out ... in order to promote the notion of national unity and peace' (p. 227). Van de Peer's 'Closed windows onto Morocco's past: Leila Kilani's *Our Forbidden Places*' offers a concise introduction to King Hassan II's iron rule and the repressive measures undertaken between 1961 and 1999 in Morocco. The film *Our Forbidden Places* takes the viewer through a series of testimonies that illustrate the complexities of a social system full of silences and all kinds of prohibitions, where trauma can be literally unspeakable as well as unrepresentable for an entire generation of citizens who experience a reconciliation process as a new trauma. The chapter illustrates why the Moroccan Equity and Reconciliation Commission cannot offer 'a platform for a selected member of victims of [the] Years of Lead to attempt to speak about their suffering' (p. 249). Here, fiction efficiently challenges institutional lies and silences. 'Beyond "victimology": generating agency through film in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo' offers a brief history of Congo and the consequences of colonization. The two films *True Story* and *Twaomba Amani*, which focus on the abuse experienced by women, emphasize the importance of cinema in

'pulling creativity out of conflict' (p. 254). 'Truth, reconciliation and cinema: reflections on South Africa's recent past in ubuntu's wounds and homecoming' discusses the successes and limitations of the TRC through the new history film, which contrasts with dominant Western and Hollywood productions.

Overall, *Art and Trauma in Africa* is a very useful book that provides new representations of the continent and the agency of its population. The reader not only discovers new artists but also acquires a better understanding of Africa from several disciplinary backgrounds. It explores an area rarely considered in current scholarship of African cultural practices: namely, that the ability of art to be therapeutic is intrinsically linked to its ability to represent the perspectives of those affected by conflict and trauma.

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TWO ETHNOGRAPHIES OF SOUTH–NORTH MIGRATION

RUBEN ANDERSSON, *Illegality, Inc.: clandestine migration and the business of bordering Europe*. Oakland CA: University of California Press (pb US\$29.95 – 978 0 52028 252 0). 2014, 338 pp.

IRIS BERGER, TRICIA REDEKER HEPNER, BENJAMIN N. LAWRENCE, JOANNA T. TAGUE and MEREDITH TERRETTA, editors, *African Asylum at a Crossroads: activism, expert testimony, and refugee rights*. Athens OH: Ohio University Press (hb US\$45 – 978 0 8214 2138 3). 2015, 280 pp.

These books differ profoundly in terms of structure and character of the narrative. Whereas the first is a monograph of a mobile anthropologist, the latter is a co-production by a multidisciplinary group of scholars dealing with African asylum cases. Andersson's book aims to understand a whole 'industry' binding together a countless number of actors, while Berger and her colleagues share the ambition of discussing the role of one single actor in asylum processes – the expert witness. Despite these differences, the books have more in common than one initially expects.

First and foremost, both books are particularly successful in enhancing our understanding of the logics – and illogics – of migration apparatuses in 'the North' that produce the barriers to human mobility that African movers face on their pathways to a better future. With this commonality, the books complement each other in their critique of the way in which human mobility has become a crucial stratifying factor in times of globalization. Second, both readings pay considerable attention to specific encounters in the migration process. *Illegality, Inc.* discusses the moment when the irregular migrant meets the border guard, and *African Asylum at a Crossroads* concentrates on the way in which the asylum seeker is confronted with an often surrealist bureaucracy. Both books stress the intertwined roles and ritualized behaviours in these specific scenarios. Andersson portrays 'a border game' in which 'facilitators, migrants, rescue services, guardias, and police have their assigned roles' (p. 86). Different authors included in *African Asylum at a Crossroads* point at similar dynamics by framing the asylum process as 'a performance' (Hepner) or an 'asylum dance' (Berger).