

African Films in the Classroom

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Abstract: A wealth of excellent films from Africa is readily available for classroom use, even if much of Anglophone Africa remains poorly represented. African films can serve to challenge students' assumptions and to foster a critical examination of Western films set in Africa. Extending the scope of conventional "African" courses to North Africa adds a substantial body of notable productions, some of which address current concerns such as Islamic fundamentalism. African films have to be contextualized; even when they are examined as works of art and as examples of world cinema, full appreciation requires that they be considered in their historical and cultural contexts. When films are used to introduce students to Africa, critical examination is imperative—audiences that have little factual information about Africa all too readily assume that fiction and fact coincide.

Résumé: On peut noter qu'il y a pléthore d'excellents films africains disponibles pour les études en classe, même si le cinéma de l'Afrique anglophone est encore très peu représenté. Les films africains peuvent servir à mettre en question les préjugés des étudiants et à encourager un examen critique des films occidentaux utilisant un cadre africain. Pour les cours sur l'Afrique, l'inclusion de l'Afrique du Nord ajoute un nombre important de productions notables, dont certaines abordent des sujets d'actualité tel le fondamentalisme islamique. Les films africains doivent être situés dans leur contexte; même lorsqu'ils sont présentés strictement en tant qu'œuvres artistiques, une appréciation véritable demande qu'ils soient examinés dans leur contexte historique et culturel. Pour les étudiants introduits à l'Afrique par le moyen du cinéma, il est impératif de les diriger vers une analyse critique—un public qui a peu d'information sur l'Afrique prend trop facilement la fiction pour la réalité.

Much of this essay is pertinent to the teaching of African cinema, but my focus is on teaching with African films.¹ Many academics look askance at

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the study of fiction film in the classroom; they see entertainment taking the place of serious study and assume that the instructor is having an easy time of it to boot. A number of historians, however, have been engaged for quite some time in a serious debate about the relation of historical film to history. Robert Rosenstone (1995), for one, has developed a perspective that moves beyond the traditional critique of historical films. He argues that while film is different from written discourse, and necessarily so, this very difference constitutes an important contribution; he posits historical film as a history *sui generis*. Thus it may be argued that the transmission of history is undergoing a profound change, entering an age in which the history of the film stands alongside the history of the book and providing a more comprehensive view of the past. There is, of course, precedent for such a major change in the transmission of history, since the history of the book was preceded by the history of orature.

The argument may be extended beyond history to African studies in its many facets. Films can play a unique role in introducing Westerners to the continent and its people and in engaging them in African experiences. Films illuminate with images what text can barely convey, and they bring foreign settings alive in images, sound, characters, and story. They integrate in individual characters multiple aspects of politics, society, and culture that tend to be compartmentalized in academic writing, and they endow abstract concepts with readily accessible meaning. Their dramatic stories elicit emotional responses and their individual characters inspire empathy for people living in distant lands. Such intimate portraits of people who belong to another culture, who have experienced a different history, and who live in quite different economic and political circumstances today, are particularly important with audiences that start out with negative views of the "Other." Cinema—and the capacity of its images, sounds, and settings to block out all other stimuli—provides an immediacy of experience that the written word cannot match.

There is a further consideration. In the classroom we have to contend with the (usually problematic) images of Africa and the Arab world that are predominant in Western cinema and on television. Alternative images informed by an African perspective are an obvious antidote. Inasmuch as films produced in Africa differ from those produced in the U.S. and the West generally, their study leads students to critically evaluate media representations of the continent.

Meanwhile, fine resources are now available for teaching with African films, including the following: (1) a wealth of excellent films, many of which have gained international renown, from Francophone Africa, as well as from South Africa and Lusophone Africa; (2) dramatically improved distribution (including the films in M-Net's large African Film Library, available as Video on Demand and including classics that have never been or are no longer in distribution); (3) greatly expanded scholarship on African cinema that has appeared in recent years, offering guidance to teachers

and their students; (4) Olivier Barlet's extraordinary *Africultures.com* (and the associated journal *Africultures*), covering the arts across the continent, with a major emphasis on film; (5) the multivolume *Directory of World Cinema* (Intellect Books), which is set to include Africa, first with a volume on Africa south of the Sahara (edited by Sheila Petty and Blandine Stefanson, who are actively recruiting contributors) and with another volume on Arab cinema in the planning stages; and (6) the increasing number of African film festivals in the U.S., and the annual PanAfrica International in Montreal, the premier African film festival now in its twenty-sixth year.²

Delineating "Africa"

Like most Africanists, I had shied away from the study of North Africa throughout my professional life. But the aftermath of 9/11 prompted me to venture north—with great trepidation, since I do not know Arabic and lack familiarity with Islam. I had the pleasure of discovering notable films from Egypt, the Maghreb, and Libya, and I gained a fresh perspective on the cinemas to the south. A comparison between the cinema of the Maghreb and that of Francophone West Africa brings to the fore similarities in their colonial heritage and the importance of European, and especially French, funding. The commercial cinema of Egypt—the so-called Hollywood on the Nile—invites comparison with Nigerian video production—a.k.a. Nollywood. Films from the Maghreb and Egypt have enriched my syllabus and allowed me to introduce students to salient issues of the day such as Islam, fundamentalism, "terrorism," and torture.

The Battle of Algiers (1966), winner of the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, stands out among depictions of the anticolonial struggle in Africa and is a classic of anticolonial struggles anywhere in the world.³ The depiction of asymmetrical warfare gained fresh relevance when the U.S. invaded Afghanistan and Iraq. Although directed by the Italian director Gillo Pontecorvo, *The Battle of Algiers* may be considered an Algerian film inasmuch as Saadi Yacef, the leader of the insurgency, was involved with the script, coproduced the film, and acted in a key role himself. The film persuasively presents the rationale for "terrorist" attacks on civilians in response to overwhelming military might and dramatically demonstrates the effectiveness of torture in extracting secrets from its victims, while suggesting the loss of legitimacy entailed in both strategies.

Mohamed Chouikh's *Youssef: The Legend of the Seventh Sleeper* (1993) offers trenchant commentary on postcolonial Algeria. When the protagonist, an amnesiac veteran living in the colonial past, sets out to find the families of his fallen comrades, he refuses to accept that the corrupt party leaders, the bosses who mistreat their workers, and the fundamentalists who oppress the very women who participated in the struggle represent a postcolonial present.

Nadia El Fani's *Beduin Hacker* (2003) subverted my students' stereotypes about Islamic societies, and in particular the position of women in

those societies, while raising a major issue in globalization. El Fani moves beyond the conventional themes of women as victims—sometimes struggling against oppression, at other times dominating the domestic domain—to show women who are very much in control in the world at large. Her female protagonist is a technology wizard who challenges Western domination of the global media, interfering with satellite transmissions in cyberspace. Scenes of French secret service agents in hot pursuit of the main character keep viewers in suspense.

Ali Zaoua, Prince of the Streets (2000), winner of the Stallion of Yennenga, the top prize at FESPACO (Festival panafricain du cinéma et de la télévision de Ouagadougou), Africa's premier film festival, is a remarkable film about street children in Casablanca. Nabil Ayouch depicts the harshness and precariousness of their lives, if in an understated way; he shows how these children find companionship with each other, troubled though it is; and his film transcends the grimness of street life altogether with a poetics of childhood that, Ayouch has argued, is part of that life. He has created a film that is moving, touching, indeed enchanting.⁴

Beyond Africa, a large body of films has arisen that is set among African migrants. Films portraying immigrants from Africa south of the Sahara received scant attention until Melissa Thackway (2003) filled the gap with a comprehensive account of the cinema by and about these immigrants and an illuminating analysis of how this cinema of the new diaspora has changed over time. Most of these films are situated in Europe, principally France, and hold little interest for students in the U.S. The notable exception is *Little Senegal* (2001) by Rachid Bouchareb, which won several major prizes in Europe. It features Sotigui Kouyaté, a veritable African icon now lost to us, who previously gave body and life to Dani Kouyaté's *Keïta! The Heritage of the Griot* (1995) in the role of a griot who introduces a boy to the *Sundjata*. In *Little Senegal* he shines in the role of an elderly tourist guide at the Goré slave dungeons prompted by a recurring dream to set out in search of the descendants of one of his kin sold into slavery two centuries ago. The film recalls the horrors of slavery and contemporary racist outrages, and it dwells on the difficult relationship between African Americans and recent African immigrants. Unfortunately, the patronizing attitude the African elder adopts vis-à-vis African Americans, and what may be seen as the perpetuating of negative stereotypes about African American men, has prompted critical reactions in the U.S.

The Maghreb has particularly strong links with France, not only through a long colonial history and but also through large-scale migration. Descendants of Maghrebi immigrants and first-generation immigrants have established the flourishing *cinéma beur*. These directors focus on the situation of the immigrant community, but some of their films connect the immigrants back to the Maghreb in narratives of return visits. Rachid Bouchareb's *Days of Glory* (2006) honors the generation of his grandfather, who came to fight for the liberation of France in 1944–45, and it challenges the French to

rewrite their history. The film was a box office success, and it earned its leading actors jointly the best actor award at Cannes. *Days of Glory* is one of those rare films whose political impact was immediate and patently obvious in various ways.⁵

Teaching Film / Teaching Africa

For film studies, the influence of oral traditions on African film remains a principal preoccupation. Thackway (2003), for one, argues for the central importance of the tradition of orature and offers an extended analysis of the structural and stylistic influences of oral traditions on many films produced in Francophone West Africa. Rather few African films are based on novels or plays, but they are commonly taught alongside African literature in language departments to illustrate the setting, to complement the stories, and to compare the approaches.⁶

Many academics, especially in the humanities, view with scorn the use of art—or rather the abuse of art, as they see it, whether it be literature or film—as a means of studying a foreign culture. But however “pure” our intentions, films from Africa present our students with representations of another culture. We have to contextualize African films for viewers who are not familiar with their historical and cultural setting, just as we have to spell out the context of a nineteenth-century novel or a French film. I also want to make my students aware of the severe economic constraints under which African directors create, and the political pressures that many of them confront.

I draw on films (and novels) to teach about Africa. I want to introduce my students to African history, politics, even a little economics, and make them appreciate cultural difference. That orientation guided the selection of the seventeen films I featured in *African Film: Re-Imagining a Continent* (2003). Here I will touch on those films only in passing, focusing instead on my omissions and more recent films. I wish I had complemented *Xala* (1974), Ousmane Sembène’s portrait of neocolonialism in newly independent Senegal, with his *Guelwaar* (1992), an exposé of the corrupting effect of foreign aid that stops short of rejecting such aid indiscriminately. I omitted films that did not fit my purpose, although a course on African cinema would be likely to include highly prized films such as Djibril Diop Mambety’s *Hyenas* (1992) and Souleymane Cissé’s *Yeelen* (1987). Such a course would also want to address the work of Med Hondo, although his films are difficult to access, except for the FESPACO winner *Sarraounia* (1986), which may be obtained from French consulates.

Several outstanding recent films have greatly expanded the scope for teaching the troubled history of South Africa. On the antiapartheid struggle, I still favor two classics: Euzhan Palcy’s *A Dry White Season* (1989), based on André Brink’s novel on the 1976 Soweto Uprising, and Oliver Schmitz’s *Mapantsula* (1988), on the resistance in the townships in the 1980s. John

Kani, the distinguished South African actor, wrote and directed *Nothing but the Truth* (2008), his first film, based on his first play, offering once more a memorable performance in the lead role. He dramatizes as familial conflict competing claims for recognition that pervade contemporary South Africa between those who actively opposed apartheid and ended up in an impotent exile and others who stayed and did the best they could for their families and their communities.⁷

On the aftermath of apartheid, two films stand out. Ramadan Suleman followed his apartheid era *Fools* (1997), based on a famous novella by the fine writer and renowned cultural critic Njabulo Ndebele, with *Zulu Love Letter* (2004). His challenging aesthetic immerses viewers in the continuing trauma of the destruction wrought by apartheid. An Australian production, Steve Jacobs's *Disgrace* (2009), based on J. M. Coetzee's novel, may appear as simply the story of a university professor who, having abused one of his students, accepts dismissal with equanimity, and his daughter who decides to remain on an isolated farm in spite of having suffered violence and losing control of her property. But the psychological drama of the father invites reflection on all those who abused their power in apartheid days, who accepted being shorn of their power afterward, whose attempts to make excuses have been rejected peremptorily, and who eventually come to ask for forgiveness. And his daughter's farm may be seen to stand for South Africa at large, where a once all-powerful minority is now dependent on the goodwill of a majority who toiled to build the country without sharing in its riches. On a lighter note Ntshavheni Wa Luruli's *The Wooden Camera* (2003) offers a story of prepubescent love between a middle-class white girl and a shanty-town black boy who has come by a film camera. The sweetness of that story is counterbalanced by that of the boy's friend who has found a gun. The film's final twist speaks volumes about the madness of apartheid ideology.⁸

For audiences interested in music and opera, Mark Dornford-May's *U-Carmen e-Khayelitsha* (2005) offers an extraordinary experience. The winner of the Golden Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival, the film immerses viewers in Khayelitsha, a township about twenty miles from Cape Town, with the story and the sound of Bizet's *Carmen*. Sung in Xhosa, the delightful film effectively incorporates local music alongside Bizet's.

I am leaving aside commercial video. In the U.S. just about any store selling African food offers quite a selection of video films. Most of them come from Nigeria's formidable video industry. Close to a thousand titles are produced every year, more titles than those of the world's most extensive film industry, that of India. This is an utterly commercial production that unreservedly caters to popular demand. These videos provide a fertile arena for studies of popular culture, which can call on the notable precedent of the study of Onitsha Market Literature, but I have yet to see a commercial video I would want to share with my students. They often extol violence, like all too many Hollywood productions. Most nefariously, many

propagate superstitious beliefs with stories based on occult forces. Special effects make these occult forces visible to their audiences; ghostly apparitions and women leaving their bodies to transform themselves into vultures or witches lend credibility to beliefs in the occult. Nollywood, however, has its partisans; Haynes (2008), Şaul and Austen (2010), and Ukadike (2003) are particularly instructive.⁹

Fiction Critically Examined

Social scientists tend to favor documentaries. While few would argue any longer that they are more “objective” than fiction films, there still seems to be a feeling that they are more “real.” Also, the fifty-minute television format of many documentaries makes them easier to integrate into class periods. I prefer teaching with fiction films. They are unrivaled in their impact on viewers, providing an immediacy of experience rarely found in documentaries. And inasmuch as they are works of art, they, like literature, bear witness to African cultural achievement.¹⁰

Film is a powerful medium, and that makes it all the more important to address the veracity of fiction films introducing viewers to Africa. Fiction is not “just fiction”; it shapes ideas and can influence action. This matters all the more because fiction films usually reach much wider audiences than documentaries do. Fiction is particularly persuasive when audiences have little factual information and tend to assume that fiction and fact coincide. Such is the case for many viewers of African films. The naïve assumption of many viewers that they are being introduced to African “reality” is fostered by the realistic presentation adopted by most African fiction, films as well as writing. Directors of fiction films, like writers of fiction, have, of course, every license to imagine. Furthermore, they and their partisans may argue that what matters is not factual accuracy but the significance of events, and they may claim artistic license to make viewers empathize with their heroes, reject their villains, or experience ambiguity.

We want to promote African film, but we have a responsibility vis-à-vis our audience, in the classroom and elsewhere. Earlier I drew on Rosenstone (1995), an eminent historian who has engaged film to a greater extent than perhaps any other social scientist. He sets a standard: the critic who accepts a film as “historical” has to judge it in the context of historical knowledge. I apply that same standard to films that are taken as portrayals of Africa, whether past or present. We have to judge such portrayals in the context of such knowledge about Africa as is available. It is incumbent upon us, as teachers, to warn our students off undue generalizations, to alert them to misrepresentations, and to foreground implicit assumptions. Such critical examination provides an opportunity to enrich our understanding of African fiction. When fiction departs significantly from generally agreed upon reality, the perspectives and agendas of directors as well as their dramatic and aesthetic strategies bear examination.¹¹

Three films, each significant in its own right in terms of the status of its director, critical acclaim, and/or popular success, may illustrate how directors significantly alter historical events, omit key elements in their representation, and invent outright. Ousmane Sembène's *Camp de Thiaroye* (1988) is a powerful denunciation of French colonialism, specifically the 1944 massacre of African soldiers who revolted against their mistreatment as they awaited discharge from the French army in Senegal. Viewers should know, however, that the film's harrowing climax takes considerable liberties with the historical record, liberties that have a bearing on the interpretation of the circumstances of the massacre. Idrissa Ouedraogo's *Yaaba* (1989) is a beautifully filmed morality tale which touchingly conveys the humanity of its characters and offers a message of tolerance. But the isolated village it presents belongs to a distant past, and as Manthia Diawara (1992) has pointed out, the film ignores complex social, political, and historical issues.¹² Jamie Uys's *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (1980) is a very funny movie about an African Garden of Eden, and it has taken audiences by storm not only in the West—in 1984 it became the highest grossing foreign film in the U.S.—but in Asia as well. A South African sequel and three Hong Kong sequels starred N!Xau, the most successful African film actor ever. He died a poor man in 2003, but soon after *The Gods Must Be Crazy* got a new life with its release on DVD along with its South African sequel. Most people—not just students, but also professional organizers of film screenings—will tell you how much they enjoyed the film. Time and again I find myself spelling out to those enthusiasts that the film's very premise, the isolation of the !Kung, or San, was a thing of the past when the film was made; that that past had been anything but idyllic; that the “real life” of N!Xau, as told by Jamie Uys promoting his film, is pure fiction; that they should reflect on the apartheid ideology that underlies “all that fun.”¹³

Challenging Students

Films play differently to different audiences. While playwrights can rewrite their plays for different audiences—Wole Soyinka is a notable example—filmmakers do not have such opportunities. And they very rarely produce alternative versions. A notable exception is Cheick Oumar Sissoko's *Finzan* (1990); the “African” version includes didactic sequences—on the consequences of female genital mutilation and the treatment of diarrhea in children—that have been omitted from the version distributed overseas.

The selection of films has to be geared to the audience. I seek to challenge my students to question what they take for granted, to reconsider their assumptions. One strategy is to have students critically examine Western films set in Africa. While many Western viewers have become sensitive to racist portrayals of their own societies, most remain impervious to how Western films set in Africa continue to play to the racist assumptions of their intended public. Thus *Out of Africa* (1985), a magnificent film, win-

ner of seven Academy Awards, continues to attract enthusiastic audiences blissfully unaware of how the film's portrayal of Africans under the colonial dispensation is utterly skewed. In fact, the film is even more skewed than Karen Blixen's autobiography on which it is based. *Inter alia* the film drastically diminishes the stature of the Africans closest to her whom she had described in quite different terms half a century earlier.¹⁴

At this time I am particularly concerned to problematize the simplistic, Manichaeian views that have become common currency in the wake of 9/11, views that employ the label of "evil" so as to deny the need to understand the "Other." Saddik Balewa's *Kasarmu Ce* (1991) contrasts the Islamic morality of a village with political corruption in Nigeria. Moussa Sene Absa posits the Mourides as a force for moral renewal in Senegal in *Tableau Ferraille* (1997).

A number of films from North Africa with Islamic fundamentalism as their central theme tend to denounce fundamentalists in uncompromising terms. Leaders are depicted as power hungry and/or corrupt, their followers as blind adherents at best. Fundamentalists are seen to impose abhorrent rules, on women in particular, and to be responsible for deplorable violence. These films make it all too easy for Westerners simply to be outraged and to applaud the directors. And indeed, many have been readily distributed in the West, quite unlike most African films. Three films distinguish themselves by transcending such reductionist depictions to some extent. In different ways each takes a step toward engaging what is commonly dismissed as incomprehensible or evil.

Youssef Chahine, the universally acclaimed Egyptian director, confronted fundamentalism with *Destiny* (1997), arguably his finest film. The epic, set in the late twelfth century in the splendor of Córdoba, the capital of what was then Muslim Andalusia, recalls the achievements of Islamic civilization and its scientific and philosophical contributions to the rise of the West. It centers on the life and teachings of the renowned Muslim philosopher Averroës, a.k.a. Ibn Rushd, who was influential in Jewish and Christian thought and played a major role in classical scholarship reaching Western Christianity. *Destiny* shows a humanist Averroës confronting the fundamentalists of the day with the affirmation "No one can claim to know the whole truth." Chahine complements the philosopher's teachings with his own philosophy of *joie de vivre* in a thoroughly entertaining story of the sage and his merry friends confronting life-denying fundamentalists.

In his debut feature *Closed Doors* (1999), Atef Hetata, like Chahine, attacks fundamentalism, but *Closed Doors* does what *Destiny* failed to do: it purposefully conveys the attractions of the fundamentalist creed and community. The compelling story of male adolescence exposes an array of social, economic, and political ills in modern-day Egypt. And it demonstrates how convincing fundamental teachings can be in that context, how compelling the attraction of a religious community that offers sustenance, guidance, and moral certainty.

Mohamed Chouikh, perhaps Algeria's foremost director, addresses the memory of Algeria's fundamentalist violence and government repression in the 1990s, the Years of Violence as they have come to be known, in a spirit of reconciliation with *Hamlet of Women* (2005). He gives voice to political grievances, if only in passing, and suggests some of the underlying causes of the conflict. His tale of the reversal of gender roles in a hamlet threatened by guerillas provides a source of humor that lightens the return to the pain of a recent past.

Films on female genital mutilation, like most films on Islamic fundamentalism, do not challenge Western perceptions. Instead they risk reinforcing stereotypes of the Dark Continent under the yoke of barbaric customs. Nwachukwu Frank Ukadike (1994:275) put it starkly with reference to one such film: "*Finzan* is a film that no African will watch and feel proud of. . . ." I have felt that I could use *Finzan* (1990) in the context of an entire course devoted to Africa. But films featuring female genital mutilation certainly need a great deal of contextualizing. I have students consider how we take for granted Western practices of manipulating the human body, with male circumcision as a prime example.

Some of my students complain that the films I show are rather depressing, and I have come to conclude the semester on an upbeat note. Several films provide a good deal of fun while also offering substance. King Ampaw's burlesque *No Time to Die* (2006) provides an opportunity to explore with students various aspects of popular culture in contemporary Ghana. *La Vie est belle* (1987), by Benoît Lamy and Mweze Ngangura, features two Congolese stars, Papa Wemba and Pépé Kalle, as well as Emoro, the famous dancing dwarf. The conventional rags-to-riches story introduces viewers to a Kinshasa neighborhood and its inequalities in the late 1980s, all the while going for laughs. *Number One* (2008), by Zakia Tahiri and Ahmed Bouchaala, entertains its viewers with the disarray of a male chauvinist who finds his behavior transformed overnight by a magic potion. He rejects his new persona but is unable to return to his old ways; the reactions of his wife and his women employees lead him eventually to embrace his new character. The tired plot device of the magic transformation of a character corresponds to a reality in Morocco, where recent legislation has drastically changed the legal status of women—for example, women can now freely initiate divorce proceedings, and men have had to accept willy-nilly new constraints on their behavior. Henri-Joseph Koumba Bididi's *The Elephant's Balls* (2000) provides a fine complement to *Kongi's Harvest* (1970), Ossie Davis's adaptation of Wole Soyinka's play denouncing dictatorship. Koumba Bididi's hilarious comedy is a rare example of a director dwelling on the corruption of the electoral process of a regime under which he lives and seeks to make films, the Gabon of little lamented Omar Bongo. Flora Gomes's *Nha Fala* (2002) is perhaps the finest African musical. Along the way Gomes touches, ever so lightly, on a range of issues confronting Africa and challenges his viewers to remember the legacy of Amilcar Cabral—unlike his stance in *The*

Blue Eyes of Yonta (1992), which appeared to hold out little prospect of this legacy's being assumed by an insouciant new generation. Enriched by finely wrought humor, *Nha Fala* is a delight.

Availability of African Films

Film selection is, of course, circumscribed by the availability of African films (see the filmography in the appendix for sources of the films referred to in this essay). It has much improved since I started teaching with African films twenty years ago—with one huge exception: very few quality films have been produced in Anglophone Africa beyond South Africa and Zimbabwe.¹⁵ California Newsreel has the largest list; recently all their films became available at home video prices even for institutional use. ArtMattan has developed a significant list in recent years. New Yorker Films, the long-established and prestigious distributor which carries virtually all of Ousmane Sembène's large oeuvre, emerged from bankruptcy in 2010. Kino International is expanding its Africa list. Arab Film Distribution is the principal distributor for Arab films. Some films that are no longer in distribution may be obtained through Interlibrary Loan.¹⁶

La Médiathèque des Trois Mondes in France has a large collection of films from across the continent as well as the new diaspora. Many of their films have English subtitles, and some can be used on standard U.S. players, but most require a player that can handle Region 2 DVDs.¹⁷ However, universal DVD players are readily available at moderate prices. Alternatively, standard DVD players can be modified. Feeding the film through a PC avoids the problem of regional coding and allows one to take advantage of the European PAL standard which, with its higher resolution, provides a better quality image than the NTSC standard that obtains in the U.S. Orders can be placed on the Internet. Their pricing of copies for institutional use does not depart as drastically from that for home videos as is the case in the U.S.¹⁸

The films in M-Net's electronic African Film Library are available as Video on Demand. UniversCiné is also offering some Africana films as Video on Demand, but they are available only to subscribers in France and Belgium.

Numerous African films can be obtained from French consulates. Notably, all the films that won first prize at FESPACO were issued by the French government in 2006 as "Les étalons de Yennenga 1972/2005."

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Notes

1. This is a revised and updated version of a paper I presented at the Five Colleges African Film Festival, Amherst, Mass., spring 2006.
2. For information on African directors and their films see Armes's *Dictionary* (2008a), which comprehensively covers the entire continent. See the bibliography in the appendix for a selection of recent scholarly studies.
3. On the anticolonial struggle, several other films deserve consideration. In *Tabataba* (1988) Raymond Rajaonarivelo calls for remembrance of the tragedy that befell Madagascar in 1947–48 when the party calling for independence was suppressed and an uprising by barely armed men was brutally repressed. Rajaonarivelo contrasts that heartrending story with a poetics of village life and its peaceful natural environment. Sarah Maldoror memorably conveys the quiet determination of ordinary people resisting colonial rule in her classic *Sambizanga* (1972), set in Angola just before the resistance's first armed action in 1961.

Flora Gomes's *Mortu Nega* (1988) is one of the extremely rare accounts of guerrilla warfare, in this case the fight against the Portuguese in Guinea-Bissau in 1973–74. The film shows guerillas enduring helicopter and artillery attacks and a specific historic event, the guerillas' attack on the Portuguese Fort Guiledge (Dhada). And it pays homage to the commitment of civilians who carried in supplies from neighboring Guinea (Conakry), threatened by land mines and aerial attacks. In *Flame* (1998) Ingrid Sinclair tells of the experiences of women guerillas in Zimbabwe fighting the settler army as well as sexism in their own ranks.

4. Africa's two most important epics come from North Africa. They hold considerable interest, but classroom use presents some difficulties. Produced with the support of Libya's Muammar al-Gaddafi and directed by Moustapha Akkad, *The Message* (1976) and *Lion of the Desert* (1981) address themes of signal importance to Africa: the birth of Islam and the resistance to the imposition of colonial rule. They are the biggest productions anywhere in Africa (except perhaps for some of Chahine's films), featuring famous actors, using elaborate sets, staging large battle scenes, and employing dramatic scores by Maurice Jarre. *The Message* was shot in two languages, an Arab version and an English version, with different actors using the same sets.

The Message tells the story of The Prophet, offering a faithful reenactment of the events surrounding his life. Muslims take for granted that representations of The Prophet, and for that matter his closest family, cannot be shown or heard. But for others the absence of the principal protagonist lessens the dramatic impact of the story, and it becomes a somewhat dry history lesson. *Lion of the Desert* tells of the long resistance to the Italian conquest of Libya. The film features dramatic battle scenes but may appear drawn-out to Western viewers.

5. On the *cinéma beur*, see Tarr (2005) and Armes (2008b).
6. This essay's filmography (see the appendix) indicates films that are literary adaptations or have been rendered in literary form. Dovey (2009) focuses on adaptations of literary works to the screen in South Africa and Francophone West Africa, placing those adaptations in a wide-ranging discussion of African film production.
7. Zola Maseko's Hollywood-style *Drum* (2004), winner of the Stallion of Yennenga at FESPACO, focuses on the investigative reporting of Henry Nxumalo in *Drum* magazine, and it brings to life the legendary jazz scene of Sophiatown, but the film is silent on the literary significance of *Drum* magazine itself. The cultural ferment of the 1950s remains enshrined in Lionel Rogosin's *Come Back, Africa* (1959), which brought Miriam Makeba, Bloke Modisane, Lewis Nkosi, and Can Themba together in a sequence that has become famous.
8. I am not featuring Gavin Hood's *Tsotsi* (2005) along with the other South African films. The Oscar win gives it greater visibility with students than any of those films. And the fact that it is based on the only novel by South Africa's foremost playwright, Athol Fugard, makes it particularly attractive for the classroom. Gavin Hood has adapted the novel—written in 1961, published in 1980—perfectly to contemporary South Africa. It may be taken as a comment on how little has changed for most blacks nearly a half century later, a full decade after majority rule—except that there is now a small elite that has moved into formerly all-white neighborhoods and that can impose its will on white police detectives. *Tsotsi* is a remarkable film: it is the first African film I am aware of that qualifies for the much misused characterization of being a universal film. It could have been set in any poor country; it could have been set in the U.S., for that matter, with some signifiers of poverty modified to the circumstances of a very rich country. For that very reason I see little purpose in showing it to students: it does not tell them anything specifically about Africa. If I wanted to illustrate how the lives of Africans resemble our own, I would rather not choose crime and violence for a theme, however much I like the human-

istic message that presumably “hardened” criminals are people who care, who would like to find love.

9. Haynes (2010) provides a comprehensive literature review.
10. Among documentaries, *Africa, I Will Fleece You* (1992), the chef-d’oeuvre of Jean-Marie Teno, Africa’s foremost documentary filmmaker, stands out. Teno offers a personal approach to Cameroon’s diverse and tormented colonial history. The film effectively complements Mongo Beti’s gripping novels denouncing French neocolonialism.

When it comes to new topics students are interested in or that they should be introduced to, only documentaries may be available. Western documentarists tend to be produced ahead of their African counterparts, but their orientation is often not that different. They commonly draw on public and/or private funding that frees them from commercial considerations, and many share local perspectives and seek to give voice and image to Africans.

11. Most film critics are ill equipped to assess the veracity of African films, or of Western fiction set in Africa for that matter. They tend to be familiar with film history—primarily Western film history—and often home in on aesthetic approaches in cinema, but they are not in a position to critically evaluate representations of a continent that remains all too remote. They commonly accept the film’s perspective uncritically; at times they repeat as fact what the film has invented.
12. Idrissa Ouedraogo’s *Kimi and Adams* (1997) presents a Zimbabwean countryside that is altogether different from the West African villages seen in *Yaaba*, *Finzan* (see below), and *Kasarmu Ce* (see below).
13. For a more detailed discussion of the problems these three films present, see Gugler (2004).
14. After seeing *Out of Africa*, President Jomo Kenyatta famously commented, “We are not amused.”
15. Ola Balogun, who was prolific in the 1970s and 1980s, has quite a reputation, but none of his films is in distribution, except for his short *River Niger*, *Black Mother* (1998), which includes a fine rendering of parts of the *Sundjata* that echoes an oral performance while enacting central events in a stylized manner. Kwaw Ansah’s highly popular *Love Brewed in the African Pot* (1981) and *Heritage Africa* (1989) may be found in Ghana on apparently genuine DVDs. Sadiq Balewa’s *Kasarmu Ce* was available until recently and may still be obtained through Interlibrary Loan.
16. An increasing number of African films previously distributed only for commercial and institutional use have become available as home video in recent years. Home videos are, of course, strictly for private screening. I find them useful as backup if something goes awry with the library copy.
17. Most DVD video discs are encoded with a region code restricting the area of the world in which they can be played.
18. Some French releases include additional material such as a “Making of,” with comments by the director and actors, that is not found on the U.S. releases. The Médiathèque’s virtually complete issue of Ousmane Sembène’s film has an entire disk with supplementary material.

Appendix

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- Africa, I Will Fleece You* (Jean-Marie Teno, 1992), Cal
- Ali Zaana, Prince of the Streets** (Nabil Ayouch, 2000), Arte Video, Film Movement

- The Battle of Algiers* (Gillo Pontecorvo, 1966), Criterion, MTM
Beduin Hacker (Nadia El Fani, 2003), CinemaLibre
The Blue Eyes of Yonta / Udju Azul di Yonta (Flora Gomes, 1992), AFLvod, Cal, UCvod
Camp de Thiaroye (Ousmane Sembène, 1988), AFLvod, MTM, NYF, UCvod
Closed Doors (Atef Hetata, 1999), AFD
Come Back, Africa (Lionel Rogosin, 1959), Milestone Films
*Days of Glory** (Rachid Bouchareb, 2006), MTM, Weinstein
Destiny (Youssef Chahine, 1997), AFLvod, MTM
*Disgrace** (Steve Jacobs, 2009), Image Entertainment
Drum (Zola Maseko, 2004), Armada Pictures
*A Dry White Season** (Euzhan Palcy, 1989), Metro Goldwyn Mayer
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Finzan (Cheick Oumar Sissoko, 1990), Cal
Flame (Ingrid Sinclair, 1998), Cal
*Fools** (Ramadan Suleman, 1997), Film Resource Unit (South Africa), UCvod
The Gods Must Be Crazy (Jamie Uys, 1980), Sony
Guelwaar (Ousmane Sembène, 1992), AFLvod, MTM, NYF, UCvod
Hamlet of Women (Mohamed Chouikh, 2005)
Heritage Africa (Kwaw Ansah, 1989)
*Hyenas** (Djibril Diop Mambety, 1992), AFLvod, Cal, Kino, MTM
Kasarmu Ce / This Land is Ours (Saddik Balewa, 1991)
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Kini and Adams (Idrissa Ouedraogo, 1997), AFLvod, Media for Development International (South Africa), Mongrel Media (Canada), UCvod
*Kongi's Harvest** (Ossie Davis, 1970)
La Vie est belle / Life is Rosy (Benoît Lamy and Mweze Ngangura, 1987), Cal
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Love Brewed in the African Pot (Kwaw Ansah, 1981)
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No Time to Die (King Ampaw, 2006), ArtM
*Nothing but the Truth** (John Kani 2008), AFLvod, ArtM
Number One (Zakia Tahiri, 2008)
*Out of Africa** (Sydney Pollack, 1985), Universal
*River Niger, Black Mother** (Ola Balogun, 1998), Cinema Guild
*Sambizanga** (Sarah Maldoror, 1972), NYF
*Sarraounia** (Med Hondo, 1986), apply to French consulate
Tabataba (Raymond Rajaonarivelo, 1988), AFLvod, MTM, UCvod
Tableau Ferraille (Moussa Sene Absa, 1997), AFLvod, Cal
*Tsotsi** (Gavin Hood, 2005), Miramax
*U-Carmen e-Khayelitsha** (Mark Dornford-May, 2005), Koch Lorber
The Wooden Camera (Ntshavheni Wa Luruli, 2003), TLA Entertainment Group
*Xala** (Ousmane Sembène, 1974), AFLvod, NYF, MTM
Yaaba (Idrissa Ouedraogo, 1989), AFLvod, UCvod

Yeelen (Souleymane Cissé, 1987), Kino

Youssef: The Legend of the Seventh Sleeper (Mohamed Chouikh, 1993), MTM

Zulu Love Letter (Ramadan Suleman, 2004), Cal

* Film is a literary adaption or has been rendered in literary form.

Principal Distributors

African Film Library (AFLvod, Video on Demand)

Arab Film Distribution (AFD)

ArtMattan Productions (ArtM)

California Newsreel (Cal)

Kino International (Kino)

La Médiathèque des Trois Mondes, Paris (MTM, many DVDs have English subtitles; most are restricted to Region 2, see note 17)

New Yorker Films (NYF)

UniversCiné (UCvod, Video on Demand, available only to subscribers in France and Belgium)