

ASR Forum: What's New in African Cinema?

Introduction

Kenneth W. Harrow, Guest Editor

Over the years Manthia Diawara's work has guided scholars and students in African cinema in multiple ways. His study of cinema production in various African countries, *African Cinema: Politics and Culture* (1992), set the stage for many major critical approaches. Among other contributions, he promoted the use of archival research into the historical periods of colonial production units, and subsequently into the directions taken in Anglophone, Lusophone, and Francophone cinemas. He deepened the study of national cinemas in this fashion, and included Zairean film at a time when West African cinema had dominated the scholarship. He also included a chapter on FESPACO, anticipating a development in the study of cinema festivals for African cinema that later was to be realized by Lindiwe Dovey (2015). Most significantly, he added a final chapter titled "African Cinema Today" in which he laid out a taxonomy of African cinema genres that was to influence a generation of scholars.

Not content with a solid career as a scholar of African cinema, he turned to filmmaking himself, and produced an important body of cine-essays, many

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in the form of biographical or autobiographical films, in the process establishing his now familiar deep voice as guide-commentator. At times the ironist, he entered the fray over the role of French cultural politics in the production of Francophone film. Yet he was not content with the Marxist ideological strain that marked much African cinema at the outset, and instead forged new directions, especially with his autobiographical, self-reflexive voice.

In 1995 he directed *Rouch in Reverse*, in which he interviewed Jean Rouch, the celebrated ethnographist-cineaste who had created *cinéma vérité*, influencing a body of works on African cultures and religions. The “reverse” in his title signaled the irony: the African was looking back at the filmmaker who had studied “his people,” placing under study the person who had asked how one could make a film “about” African people, or more important, “with” African subjects—or as Trinh T. Minh-Ha (1989) put it, alongside African subjects. Subsequently, Diawara put aside the question of “writing back” and focused increasingly on his memoirs of youth and immigration in a series of highly successful writings and films (see *In Search of Africa* [1998]; *We Won't Budge* [2004]).

Having become a fixture at FESPACO, Diawara recounts, in *African Film: New Forms of Aesthetics and Politics* (2010), how Sembène made his presence felt at the great gatherings of the annual festival, when “African cinema” was being forged to a large extent under his influence (rather than that of Rouch, who had influenced more the development of film from Niger). And then, gradually moving from the personal to the scholarly, he pursued the question of Sembène’s style, exploring closely the composition and construction of his shots, editing, and visual choices and placing this foundational African filmwork against the more recent “poetic” language of Abderrahmane Sissako. Sembène forged a new language, one that was “linear and realist,” in order to speak to an African audience that had been accustomed to the commercial onslaught of Hollywood grammar.

This approach led Diawara to reflections on three broad domains of African cinema that have now come to characterize the work of present generations of filmmakers. Whereas earlier he had emphasized thematics, with the tendencies described as “Return to the Sources,” “Colonial Confrontation,” and “Social Realist” (1992), he now took up the term made famous by the *Nouvelle Vague*—i.e., “waves”—describing three new waves as “Arte,” “La Guilde des Cinéastes,” and the “New Popular African Cinema.” By dubbing the first wave “Arte,” Diawara signaled two contradictory qualities. First, “Arte” signifies *auteur* cinema, associated with the French New Wave and marked by its distinction from the qualities of commercial cinema. To designate African filmmakers as *auteurs* is correct to the extent that they created a body of work marked by their own particular visions, especially visions of an Africanness—which Diawara called, at times, “authentic” (usually without scare quotes). Yet at the same time, the first generation of African filmmakers created an oppositional cinema that would have understood its charge as fueled not simply by the wish to express an individual aesthetic vision, but also by the goal of speaking for a population whose

history had been marked by oppression, and whose cinema needed to identify and vociferate about the forces at play in that oppression. In its most reductive form, that charge was conceived as pedagogic—what Sembène dubbed “Africa’s night school.” But at its most successful it conveyed the spirit and language of an African culture and subjectivity to which an African audience could relate, while simultaneously combating European stereotypes and denigrations. Taking the name “Arte” from the European television chain as a designation for this “wave” might seem tendentious, but it conveys Diawara’s intention to distance himself from what some have regarded as the overly didactic, Third Cinema quality of “Africa’s night school.”

The generation that followed in the footsteps of the originators of Africa’s first generation of filmmaking could be imagined to be apprentices, hence the designation “Gilde des Cinéastes.” However, a guild also suggests a congregation of new creative figures who have learned the craft and created a body of works that might not be simply “artworks,” but also useful works. Although diverse in style and content, these films share much with a diaspora sensibility that imbues their work with an almost defiant critique of the false consciousness that Western media and films continue to generate about Africa—about an Africa that is somehow present in the diaspora, much as the diaspora is sensed on the continent often as an absence-presence. In the films of emblematic filmmakers like Jean-Pierre Bekolo and Jean-Marie Teno, “more questioning of Western stereotypes of Africa” has been undertaken than in “those [of] directors residing in Africa who believe that simply telling ‘authentic’ African stories is enough.” Diawara lauds the classic work of African diaspora directors like Haile Gerima and John Akomfrah, who are “strongly convinced that the image of Africa and that of its diaspora are inextricably intertwined” (2010:130).

What Diawara refers to, finally, as “New Popular African Cinema,” includes those filmmakers who have distanced themselves from the Arte or Guild filmmakers in order to succeed in moving African audiences, or even more, non-Africans who come expecting safari experiences, to new locations. The third wave, and its heavyweight cousin, Nollywood, moves in directions that are more than “new”—they are counterrevolutionary in relation to the ideology of the first generation. Instead of eschewing commercial trends, these filmmakers often seek wide audiences and often turn to popular genres (indeed they are called genre cinemas, at times, rather than *auteur* cinema). The filmmakers are driven to succeed financially by cultivating broad markets, and the films reflect this goal. In this category we find works like Djo Munga’s *Viva Riva* (2011), which employs fast-paced, violent images and neo-Baroque and film noir techniques to create the image of Kinshasa as the location of a “certain Africa” joined to the degenerative world of sex and money. But in most cases the industry that has been truly successful in grounding itself in the popular imagination and the world of consumer capitalism is Nollywood. Diawara aptly identifies motion, and particularly rapid-fire motion, with the change, modernity, power, and occultism associated with this recent body of works, which has succeeded wildly in attracting audiences in the

millions, primarily in Nigeria but increasingly around the continent and in the diaspora. The critical approach demanded by the popular, and especially Nollywood, has made it necessary for Diawara to reinvent himself and invest in a new notion of the “authentically” African, one that reflects subjectivities developed in response to the conditions experienced on the continent after the 1990s and its period of hardship.

These ideas are explored more fully in my own article in this *ASR* Forum, “Manthia Diawara’s Waves and the Problem of the ‘Authentic’” (13–30). All of the articles were originally presented at the 2013 meeting of the African Studies Association in Baltimore, Maryland. Much of their content is aimed at analyzing new critical approaches to African film, inspired in part by the work of Diawara but also by critics such as Jonathan Haynes, Owookome Okome, Brian Larkin, Birgit Meyer, Carmela Garritano, and Moradewun Adejunmobi (who herself has contributed an article to this issue). Especially under the influence of Haynes, the critical orientation shifted initially to the development of new genres, with work on melodrama and the occult. As the genres have expanded in number and style, critical studies increasingly involve exploration of the material conditions of production and distribution and their impact on the creation of this new popular cinema, as well as its more recent evolution, or reinvention, as “New Nollywood.”

Just as neoliberal Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) in Africa have brought about economic changes, so have the Nollywood films been transformed in terms of genre and individual subjectivities. In her article “Neoliberal Rationalities in Old and New Nollywood” (31–53), Moradewun Adejunmobi considers the impact of economic and social conditions on cinematic forms and representations of subjectivity that have marked “New Nollywood.” She contrasts these works, many of which were created in the past five to seven years, with those, originally designated as “Nollywood,” that date back to the 1990s and are now referred to as “Old Nollywood.” The economic impact of SAPs is generally seen in the arena of the nation-state and its economy, with neoliberal beliefs dominant, and with the state and its functions seen as shrinking. The work of Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (2000) is often cited in connecting these developments to changes in social beliefs and visual cultures and to the onset of occultism. Expanding on the Comaroffs’ work, Adejunmobi tracks the continuities between “Old” and “New” Nollywood, and with them the conditions that marked that original body of work, while also noting the considerable changes that have taken place. Her essay grounds cinematic work in material conditions that have changed radically with the onset of neoliberalism but that still are marked by the implicit forms of inequality that they perpetuate. She writes,

The inability of New Nollywood filmmakers to evade the specter of the term ‘Nollywood’ might be a metaphor for the current status of this ‘new wave.’ Formal proclamations of rupture with previous storytelling practices must contend with the prevailing conditions for the production and reception of narrative at a given point in time. (46)

In “New Nollywood: A Sketch of Nollywood’s Metropolitan New Style” (55–76), Connor Ryan focuses on how metropolitan culture is reflected in New Nollywood’s strategies of representation and also analyzes the new strategies of theatrical exhibition intended to circumvent the debilitating effects of piracy. The label “New,” as Adejunmobi also emphasizes, signifies films with higher production values than those of “Old” Nollywood as well as shifts away from relatively static generic patterns such as divine retribution for moral infringements, the denigration of occult village traditions, and especially the anxieties over embracing modernity. In the New Nollywood vision, the lifestyle and money associated with entrepreneurship are no longer regarded as morally suspect, or even necessarily a sign of a divine blessing, but rather as normalized attributes of the middle-class audience—especially of those who are desirous of viewing, and can afford the tickets for, higher quality films in new mall locations.

The Nollywood boom has had an impact on every facet of cinema in Africa, including the increasing number of film festivals where previously “celluloid” or “FESPACO” films—*auteur*, *engagé*, nationalist, “serious” cinema—had accounted for most of the films in the competition. Now the presence of the “digital” cannot be totally ignored. Indeed, at this year’s FESPACO competition the year 2015 was identified as the “year of the digital.” As Adejunmobi (2015) says, popular media has taken a “televisual turn,” and Ryan explores the ramifications of the popular and the commercial turn in terms of the culture and cinema infrastructure of Lagos. Part of that urban culture entails the visual components of consumerism, with filmmakers like Kunle Afolayan and Tunde Kelani seeking corporate sponsorship, branding products in their films, and promoting lifestyles marked by consumption. According to Ryan, New Nollywood “stands as a direct expression of the cultural and economic forces shaping life in Lagos today” (55). Afolayan’s *Phone Swap* is marked by all the above qualities, including a plot that turns on the inadvertent switching of cell phones by a man and a woman whose accidental meeting and inadvertent swap lead inevitably to a romantic involvement. With cell phone usage in the millions in Nigeria, the possibilities of product placement provided a singular opportunity for the filmmaker. But what is perhaps more important is that both Adejunmobi and Ryan see New Nollywood as marked not only by technical improvements in the films, but also by strategies driven by the filmmakers’ desires to create films whose value and quality are measured by more than sales. The result seems to be an emerging distinction in which “Old” and “New” are implicated in each other, while still being distinct enough for us to speak of a “new” development or phase. Ryan sees in this change an echo of Hollywood’s early years. He claims that

The fact that this sort of differentiation occurs within a single company, almost like Hollywood’s two-tiered system of “A” and “B” films, indicates that Nollywood’s recent hodgepodge differentiation of films does not arise from a gap in technical capabilities or competency as much as it reflects

different filmmakers' measured strategies for contending with an unwieldy, unforgiving video market. (59)

However, what far exceeds Hollywood's original industrial capabilities are precisely the possibilities of a digital age as seen in on-line releases, satellite television, and in-flight screenings as well as multiplex showings at home and abroad.

The vocabulary of "waves," and especially of the "new wave," is bound up in the paradigms of the "new" as detailed in the history of cinema. But what African popular and *auteur* cinema have engendered is a shift in paradigms as well as critical models. In "The Winds of African Cinema" (77–92), Maryellen Higgins challenges the dominant trope of the past by shifting the figure of the wave to that of winds. She writes, "In lieu of speaking of a 'new wave,' . . . I would like to suggest the metaphor of intersecting winds, winds that sweep in and change the direction of currents in the international arenas of cinema" (79). For her, the movement of waves

suggests that one wave follows the other with a perceivable pattern, perhaps picking up elements of the previous waves as it rises—sometimes being overcome by the retrieving forces of the earlier waves, and sometimes rising higher than the preceding waves, before crashing and merging with the waves that eventually follow. (78)

Winds, however, are to a large extent freer of the forces or influences that preceded them: "letter films," as seen in the work of Mahamet-Saleh Haroun, or in Sissako's *Waiting for Happiness*, confound the motions of intertextuality with diversions that move unpredictably in relation to the past. "Waves, at least to the naked eye, appear to be derivatives of previous waves . . . [and] one 'new wave,' Higgins claims "cannot contain the intersecting global gusts of Africa cinemas . . ." (78–79).

The trope of winds suggests movement on a larger scale than that of the flow of economic forces, with their servility to market forces; it opens the spectator to the wider sphere of "world cinema," which African cinema has always struggled to enter. In terms of genealogy, where Sembène and others, according to Bekolo, came to constitute the "fathers of African cinema," one exception who remained a wayward spirit, Djibril Diop Mambety, reminds us that the currents, or winds, of world cinema can respond to a range of *différences*. As with Diawara's focus on motion as the key element for Nollywood, Higgins's article privileges change as the defining feature for contemporary African film. She writes, "Winds can stir and change the landscape, as African video booms have altered the landscapes of cinema viewing in Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, and beyond. . . . Winds are subject to diverse interpretations and names: from the Harmattan to the Haboob, to the Chubasco to the Sirocco, the Brisote and the Elephanta" (81). Winds are resistant to teleological readings, and "it is difficult to trace the beginning and the end . . ." (82). She reminds us that "the dead

are not dead,” as Birago Diop put it, and for Higgins this also means that “the dead are not dead in recent African cinemas. If you listen to the sighs of the film, you can hear the ancestors breathing” (82).

Like Diawara, Higgins evokes the concept of *négritude* for values that inspire motion, change, and a positivity of force with which African cinema resonates—the close-up of the face that speaks its own connections to an ancestral mask, to a “figurine” that may or may not be real, as seen in Afolayan’s reading of his own film of that title. Higgins looks back to the earlier work of African directors and incorporates them into her figure of change, bringing us back to the concept of the new as signaled in Diawara’s work. As she writes, “Wind, in addition to serving as a conceptual tool that recognizes the great ancestral breaths in African cinema and beyond, can also herald political changes and aesthetic changes” (84).

This ASRForum seeks to continue the work inspired by Manthia Diawara, who has himself changed his focus and approach over the years, while yet remaining faithful to the goal of locating and explaining the great value of African cinematic creation.

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