AN IMPORTANT RESOURCE ON AFRICAN CINEMA

Dictionary of African Filmmakers. By ROY ARMES. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008. Pp. xii+397. £42/$65, hardback (ISBN 978-0-253-35116-6).

KEY WORDS: culture/cultural, dictionaries, film.

Roy Armes's *Dictionary of African Filmmakers* is an important resource for all those interested in African cinema. Following an introduction in which Armes lays out the issues that he confronted in deciding whom to include, and what format to utilize, there are three sections. The first is an alphabetic listing of filmmakers that includes information on each filmmaker: brief biographical notes for important figures, brief references to their work, and listings of their feature films. This constitutes about one-third of the volume.

It is followed by a section titled 'Feature film chronologies', which is organized by country and which contains annual listings of feature films. There one discovers the dramatically unbalanced distribution of film industries: Egypt's listings go back to 1923 and in each decade after the 1930s contain hundreds of films – with a total of 3,082 feature films listed in 61 pages. Only South Africa among other African film industries compares even slightly, with 1,434 feature films, some also dating back to the silent period. In contrast, Burundi has just one film listed, *Gito the Ungrateful* (1992), and even Cameroon, known for a number of major directors, has produced only forty feature films. Lastly, Part Three contains an index of film titles, given in both English and the original language. The volume concludes with a brief, but useful, bibliography containing texts that provide background on African cinema and related topics such as postcolonialism, as well as texts that are general studies of African cinema.

The volume provides valuable information for scholars working in the field but, as it appears in book form, it immediately gives rise to the question of what to do about updating the information. In the age of IMDB, it is almost an anomaly for a printed volume to serve as a resource. However, we can say that, with this dictionary's appearance in 2008, a baseline of data has been established on which future entries can now build.

However, the basis for the inclusion and exclusion of entries is not un-controversial. The introductory essay attempts to offer rationalizations for both. Thus, Nigerian video films are excluded on various grounds. First there are logistics: some 7,000 were made, by one estimation, between 1992 and 2005 (with approximately a thousand more appearing annually now). Those numbers are daunting, but 61 pages of Egyptian listings indicate that numbers alone are not at stake. Armes writes that 'Nigerian home videos are destined not for public projection but for domestic consumption with a family context'. He argues that their economic base, shooting, and distribution strategies are 'totally different from that shaping any sort of true film activity' (p. 3). There is no more dynamic branch of African filmmaking currently than Nollywood, and the debate over whether Nigerian video films constitute 'true films' has long been settled in most film circles. The issue is not exhibition venues, since they are continually changing and small theatre showings are growing. The commercial cinema industry in Africa is alive almost entirely due to the astonishing innovation of Nollywood. Its exclusion is a mark of the attempt to maintain a canonical understanding of film that is grounded in older notions of national film culture. Armes acknowledges the change, citing the inclusion of digital films in festivals such as FESPACO as well as in television formats, yet excludes them from the volume.

Secondly, there is the question of including non-African filmmakers in a volume titled *Dictionary of African Filmmakers*. Here the argument turns on what constitutes a national film industry. In this context, Armes faced considerable difficulties, as in the issue of whether to include Beur filmmakers, born in France, living in France, shooting in France, but still considered North African. Guerdjou is an example, and he is identified as a 'French-based filmmaker of Algerian descent, but French nationality' (p. 71). Many other complicated examples are cited, indicating that much more is at stake than the inevitable ambiguities of any classificatory system; rather it is the problematic identitarian quagmire that results from dependence on the nation as an organizing principle.

Armes honestly confronts the difficulties of the task, demonstrating convincingly that, if the 'nationality of a specific film is problematic, the notion of a national cinema is even more so' (p. 10). However, it remains the only category that he can imagine using, and thus he decides to include Zolton Korda's film, *Cry the Beloved Country*, while excluding his other films, such as *Sanders of the River*, on the ground that the former was indisputably part of the national film culture of South Africa. What globalization now makes clear is the inadequacy of the notion of national culture in an age of transnational economies.

Michigan State University   KENNETH W. HARROW

STEREOTYPES OF AFRICA IN THE UNITED STATES

Mistaking Africa: Curiosities and Inventions of the American Mind. By CURTIS KEIM. Second edition. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2009. Pp. xiii+234. £18.99/$32, paperback (ISBN: 978-0-8133-4386-0).
KEY WORDS: culture/cultural, ideology, knowledge, Western images of Africa.

It begins at an early age. A popular book, which current American college students may have read in their toddler years, follows Bert and Ernie of Sesame Street as they traverse the wilds of Africa on safari.[1] Dressed in khaki, they play peek-a-boo not only with the likes of zebras, leopards, and giraffes but with tigers, too. Cultural production even in its most innocent forms finds a way to generate false categories of knowledge about Africa, perpetuating and recycling myths mired in centuries-old stereotypes of the 'Dark Continent' and how Westerners have encountered it. The second edition of Curtis Keim's useful and enjoyable *Mistaking Africa: Curiosities and Inventions of the American Mind* deftly debunks these myths by explaining 'what Africa is not'. Though this book is an indictment of American imaginings of Africa, Keim's evenhanded tone and explanatory skill invite undergraduates and educated readers unfamiliar with scholarship on Africa to challenge their preconceptions of the continent and its people without estranging them. Keim succeeds in this endeavor by explaining the genealogy of this false knowledge, by illustrating that such imaginings have very real and sometimes dangerous moral, political, and economic consequences, and by highlighting the objectification of Africa and Africans in how Americans (here mainly white and middle-to-upper class) make sense of themselves in the world.

---

[1] *Hide-and-Seek Safari*, illustrated by Tom Cooke (New York, 1988).