FILM REVIEWS

FEATURE FILMS

Sara Blecher, director. *Ayanda*. 2015. 109 minutes. Sesotho, Zulu, and English, with English subtitles. South Africa. Restless Distribution. No price reported.

Sara Blecher's feature film *Ayanda* opened the 36th Durban International Film Festival in July 2015 after receiving special mention at the June 2015 Los Angeles Film Festival (where it was screened as *Ayanda and the Mechanic*). Filmed on location in Johannesburg, *Ayanda* intertwines several narrative threads. The eponymous protagonist (played by Fulu Mugovhani) is an indefatigable twenty-one-year-old artist who welds scraps into art pieces in the garage of her late father, Moses. Devastated by his early death, Ayanda refuses to surrender the relics of the past: the garage and her father's Cortina Mark 3.

What "drives" the narrative are the questions posed about Afropolitanism alongside the film's recognition of cultures of mobility within Africa. The film's Afropolitanism is filtered through the lenses of Anthony Bila, "the Expressionist," a young Johannesburg-based photographer, videographer, and artist who either plays himself or, depending on how one looks at his performance, plays a supporting character of the same name. Anthony interviews most of the characters in the film and his photographs punctuate the film's snapshot montages. Anthony calls his project an "installation," and the film itself might be interpreted as such. As Achille Mbembe writes in his essay "Afropolitanism" (in *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent*, edited by S. Njami and L. Durán, Johannesburg Art Gallery, 26–30), recognizing histories of itinerancy, mobility, blendings, and superimpositions counters fundamentalist and xenophobic ambitions. Arguably, one specter that haunts Blecher's film is the recent violence against African migrants to South Africa in Durban, Johannesburg, and elsewhere. In *Ayanda*, the Afropolitan counternarrative to national insularity is found in what Lindsey Green-Simms might term its "automobility" ("Postcolonial Automobility: West Africa and the Road to Globalization," Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 2009). Intercontinental voyages are presented in fantastical animated scenes with cars, spinning pineapples, and tongues that turn into tunnels as their drivers escape various hazards. Anthony interviews characters originally from Angola, Lesotho, Zimbabwe, and Ethiopia, in addition

https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2015.104 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to a tailor from Entebbe Road in Kampala, who worked for Obote and Idi Amin before fleeing to South Africa in his Karmann Ghia. African mobility is also projected in the interviews with various migrant characters in the suburb of Yeoville: Ayanda's father, Moses, arrived from Lagos with $20 in his pocket, and the mechanic David, Ayanda's boyfriend (played by the Nigerian actor and musician OC Ukeje), is a recent immigrant from Nigeria who left when his father faced political persecution. Yeoville, Anthony recalls, is a place that has long been a "melting pot of cultures": There are "people from Senegal, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Ghana, Nigeria. . . ." The allegorical dimension of Blecher's film is voiced through Anthony's installation project; amidst the rebuilding and remodeling in a new South Africa, the country's Afropolitan roots and routes provide its most dynamic contributions. The characters in the film who refer to Nigerians as "foreigners" are clearly misguided.

Sleek sports cars are often perceived as symbols of class status or middle-age crisis, yet in this case the autos function as comments upon the migratory histories of Yeoville's inhabitants and the processes of rebuilding new lives from the scraps of the past. On its own, the narrative about a woman mechanic who manages to keep her deceased father's garage financially afloat might have been tighter, but it would not have been nearly as interesting without these various narrative threads. Like the contributors to Sarah Nuttall and Mbembe's *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis* (Duke 2008), Blecher's film positions Joburg—and more particularly Yeoville—as the site of Afropolitanism par excellence—a place whose "politan" status is not dependent on inhabitants who travel outside of the continent.

Anthony initially asks "what it means to be African" amid widespread misrepresentations: "It's not all civil war and kwashiorkor." The film's embedded, shifting responses engage in varying degrees with contemporary debates on "Afropolitanism": Is it a commercial, consumerist aesthetic that takes its cues from European and American models? (Ayanda and her coworkers refashion old German, American, and Italian sports cars now driven by Nigerians, South Africans, and Ugandans.) Is the celebration complete when they finally remake the broken-down 1972 Karmann Ghia and sell it for 45,000 Rand? Or are the battered cars a symbol of the breakdown of inclusive cosmopolitanisms in increasingly insular, provincial spaces within Europe and the U.S.? In other words, is Joburg remaking a more versatile, mobile cosmopolitanism from its tattered scraps? And is filmmaking itself a kind of remodeling—are the stylish outfits, cool animation, genre play, and snapshot montages signs of a locally blended, worldly cinematic flair? One thing that is clear is that the film's meditation on "modern Africans" does not reinforce what S. Okwunodu Ogbechie describes in the essay, "'Afropolitanism': Africa without Africans (II)" as a (flawed) "concept of globalization that erases Africans who live on the African continent from its purview" (http://aachronym.blogspot.com/2008/04/afropolitanism-more-africa-without.html). *Ayanda* situates South Africa, a country once imagined by its rulers as a place apart from the rest of the continent, within a dynamic, continental, multilingual, and multicultural African space.

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In a voice-over narration that blends into Ayanda's story, Anthony remarks, "When it isn't dealt with, tragedy is about the shadows of a life that might have been." The dramatic problems that pile up before the film reaches its conclusion—thefts, jailings, family secrets, crushed dreams, alcohol abuse, and the hardship of letting go—are wrapped up quickly (a few resolutions seem to unfold within the length of one song on the film's soundtrack). But Blecher does not shy away from tragedy. Her second feature in the festival, *Dis Ek, Anna* (2015), delves head-on into the complex aftermath of sexual abuse. What is refreshing about *Anna* is that it does not follow the usual structure of trauma narratives in which a disturbed character suffers silently throughout the film until he or she finally reveals the details of a horrible story near the end. Instead, the horrible story is present at the outset, and it is the surrounding patriarchal society that attempts to dismiss and silence the protagonist. In a panel discussion in Durban, Blecher remarked that *Anna* was made for her grandmother, while *Ayanda* was made for her daughter. *Anna* attends more pointedly to the scars of the past. *Ayanda* lovingly creates a portrait of resilient, creative, pan-African agents in the process of shaping a future.

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doi:10.1017/asr.2015.104

David Constantin, director. *Lonbraz Kann (Sugarcane Shadows).* 2014. 88 minutes. Mauritian Creole with English subtitles. Mauritius. Caméléon Production. No price reported.

Lonbraz Kann, the first feature-length film by the Mauritian director David Constantin, opens with the pending closure of a sugar mill that has been the source of work for local inhabitants for several generations. Nearby, luxury villas are being constructed; a billboard advertises the arrival of "Your Private Eden"—luxury plantation-style villas. To make way for further developments, the homes of plantation workers are being razed and bulldozed. Chinese construction workers have been brought in to labor on the villas, and resentment is building among the unemployed workers. Some of the newly unemployed are descendants of indentured servants who migrated to Mauritius from India. Constantin and his co-writer, Sabrina Compeyron, won the award for best screenplay at the Durban International Film Festival in 2015.

Shot in the spaces of actual construction sites beyond the beaches in Mauritius, *Lonbraz Kann* explores a place where emotions are sparsely verbalized. Characters sit quietly together in grim waiting rooms, contemplating hillsides, sharing cigarettes, and waiting for managers. Silence does not mean lack of communication, however; much can be read in the characters' gestures and in the symbolism of the scenes. In one scene, for