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Review

MICHAEL W. THOMAS, *Popular Ethiopian Cinema: Love and Other Genres*

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In conclusion, Bahru's autobiography is yet another testament to the meticulous scholar that he is. The simplicity of the Amharic, the thorough editing that has been undertaken, and the book's linguistic clarity all confirm the respect that he has both for his work and for his Ethiopian audience. Bahru has presented his life as intricately woven with the history of Ethiopia in the twentieth century, with diverting humorous anecdotes and jokes included throughout the narrative. But ultimately, what stands out in this book is the academic rigour of the early years of the AAU, making the book a mirror that reflects the tragic state of contemporary Ethiopian universities and the ever-declining quality of education and scholarship in the country.

In the end, one is still left wondering about some things regarding the historian. For example, is Bahru religious? And what does he think about Ethiopia today (post-EPRDF)? And what exactly was his role in the Ethiopian Student Movement? Such are things the historian brushes past, but perhaps he will allow us to ask him these much more personal questions in other settings.

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MICHAEL W. THOMAS, *Popular Ethiopian Cinema: Love and Other Genres*, World Cinema Series (London–New York, NY–Oxford–New Delhi, Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023). xviii, 261 pp. Price: £81.00. ISBN: 978-1-350-22740-8.

Michael W. Thomas's *Popular Ethiopian Cinema: Love and Other Genres* is an original, well-structured and well-researched book that will definitely become a reference in African film studies, and in film genre studies in the years to come and will constitute a valuable resource for scholars in Ethiopian studies interested in contemporary popular culture in the Horn of Africa. Its exploration of the processes of formation of film genres in a specific cultural and geographic context (Ethiopia) offers thought-provoking contributions to the study of film genres and film industries globally—two field of studies that have remained mostly focused on western case studies or on dominant film industries (Hollywood, Bollywood, Nollywood) up until today. And its monographic focus on Ethiopian cinema, and particularly on commercial Amharic language films produced in Addis Abāba (the dominant production trend in Ethiopia), fills a gap in Ethiopian studies, offering important insights for the understanding of one of the most prominent forms of contemporary Ethiopian popular culture.

Of particular interest is the inductive approach adopted in the book. The author does not try to make local productions fit into already existing generic categories, but he rather makes an attempt to develop a bottom-up cultural and historical un-

derstanding of how specific genre categories have emerged over time in the Ethiopian context. Thanks to his profound knowledge of the Amharic language and Ethiopian history, the author produces an attentive, context-specific analysis that aims to contribute to global debates about film genres from the specific vantage point of the Ethiopian reality. As Thomas underlines in the introduction, Ethiopian film producers and exhibitors use specific generic definitions to describe and commercialize local films, an ethnographic fact that opens the space for Thomas's research into how genres are discursively constructed locally, what commercial role they play, and how they can be differentiated from their foreign equivalents. Applying what Carmela Garritano defines as 'contextual criticism',¹ Thomas interrogates how specific aesthetic and narrative constructs emerge in relation to specific historical and cultural contingencies and digs into the complexity of the relational and generative processes that ground the emergence of films as specific cultural objects. As the British scholar of African popular cultures, Karin Barber, suggested a few years ago, 'we need to ask why, at a certain time and place, we find these textual forms and not others; and how specific textual forms participate in constituting specific historical forms of consciousness'.² This is what Thomas's books does in a sophisticated and precise way. The textual and aesthetic formations that his work uncovers help us understand how Ethiopian society looks at itself and the world at a specific moment in its history, after technological innovation liberalized the production of moving images and economic growth gave access to leisure to a new class of young Ethiopians in search for local entertainment.

The book is structured in three parts, which aim to present the Ethiopian film industry in its full historical complexity and aesthetic variety. The first part is devoted to the historical analysis of the development of film in Ethiopia, from the very first experiences of film screenings during the reign of Emperor Mənilək II to the development of multiplex cinemas in the 2010s; from early celluloid experiments to contemporary forms of commercial filmmaking. Here, with abundance of original archival materials, Thomas provides a detailed history of cinema in Ethiopia, focusing first on the moving geography of film exhibition in Addis Abāba and then on the complex development of filmmaking practices. The depth and precision of this historical account are unprecedented for the study of Ethiopian cinema, and they will undoubtedly become a reference for future research in Ethiopian and African cinema. Furthermore, much of the information that

¹ C. Garritano, *African Video Movies and Global Desires: A Ghanaian History*, Research in International Studies, Africa Series, 91 (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2013), 8.

² K. Barber, *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics*, New Departures in Anthropology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 41.

Thomas uncovers could contribute in complexifying existing accounts about the history of sub-Saharan African cinema, which focus predominantly on West African experiences, giving Ethiopia the place on the map of African cinema history that it rightly deserves.

The second part conceals the heart of the book's argument and theoretical proposition, as it digs into the specificities of contemporary Ethiopian film genres, taking love (*fəqər*) as a guiding principle. Here, Thomas's main argument is clear: love is not only the narrative element guiding much of Ethiopian film plots, but it is also a deeper philosophical principle that funds the epistemological structure of Ethiopian society, deep down to its roots in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Gə'əz literature and philosophy. It is a principle of relationality that informs the moral structure of social life, and as such, beyond romantic relationships, family bonds, and friendship, it 'can be associated with moral virtues juridical oversight, wisdom, dynamism and the divine'; as a result, in Ethiopian philosophical sense, 'without love, the truthful meaning and understanding of one's own life cannot be achieved' (p. 10). Focusing on four different film genres (*yäfəqər film*, 'love film'; *assəqiñ yäfəqər film*, 'humorous love film'; *ləbb anṭälṭay film*, 'suspense film'; and *yäbetäsäb film*, 'family film'), Thomas demonstrates how 'the multiple meanings and usages of the word in naming genres directly places *fiker* [*fəqər*] as, not only a central theme in popular Ethiopian cinema that emphasises the social and moral underpinnings of most films, but as a vital structuring concept for the industry as a whole in its prolific usage in naming genres and in the titles of films themselves' (p. 12).

The third part of the volume anchors the analysis of films and genres conducted in the second part to the rich ethnographic research conducted by Thomas in Addis Abāba. The chapters included in this section thus guide the reader through the meanders of Ethiopian film marketing, production, and reception practices, adding valuable sociological, cultural, and economic insights to the historical and aesthetic understanding of Ethiopian cinema produced in the rest of the book. We learn to appreciate the complex balance between informal and more standardized economic practices that characterize both the production and marketing of this emergent film industry, and we follow the audiences in their cinemagoing experience. Here, too, Thomas is careful in showing us the central importance of generic categories for the organization of both marketing and consumption, which demonstrates the potential of an approach that, like the one developed in this book, take genres as holistic categories that drive the cinematic experience from conception to reception. Particularly valuable in this final part is the analysis of what Thomas defines as the 'paratextual indicators of genre', that is, the presentation of film genre categories in local film posters and VCD jackets. This analysis, conducted on the ground of a rich collection of visual images, allow the reader, to-

gether with the numerous other illustrations included in the book, to have a perception of the visual universe of Ethiopian cinema, with its specificity and unique nuances.

With its accessible style, wealth of information, and clearly presented theoretical propositions, this book is suitable for both scholars and students interested in African and global cinema and media studies, Ethiopian studies, and African studies more generally. It can also be a valuable resource to wider audiences interested in the rich, yet little known tradition of cinema that has developed in Ethiopia since the introduction of the first cinema projector in the country during the time of Emperor Menelik II.

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ARCHIE T. WRIGHT, *Basics of Ancient Ethiopic: A Complete Grammar, Workbook, and Lexicon*, Foreword by LOREN T. STUCKENBRUCK, Zondervan Language Basics Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2022). xxi, 352 pp. Price: \$59.99. ISBN: 978-0-310-53904-9.

Since the number of English-language textbooks of Gə'əz (Classical Ethiopic) is limited, the appearance of a new one is exciting for teachers and students alike. Archie T. Wright's *Basics of Ancient Ethiopic: A Complete Grammar, Workbook, and Lexicon* opens with a foreword by Loren T. Stuckenbruck and an Acknowledgments section, in which the author explains that this textbook emerged from the recognition that 'the major drawback' of Thomas O. Lambdin's 1978 Gə'əz primer¹ is its almost exclusive use of transliteration. In contrast, this book aims to 'make accessible the Gə'əz language in its "original" script', hoping to 'prepare the student to read the Ethiopic manuscripts of the many texts from the Enochic and Jubilees corpuses, among others, found in the Ethiopic manuscript traditions' (p. xix). Indeed, *Basics of Ancient Ethiopic* is primarily aimed at those interested in the Ethiopic versions of biblical and pseudepigraphic texts, as underlined by the frequent comparisons with Biblical Hebrew throughout the book.

The body of *Basics of Ancient Ethiopic* is divided into thirty-eight chapters that offer a progressive introduction to Gə'əz grammar and vocabulary, with most chapters consisting of three parts: a lesson in grammar, a vocabulary list, and exercises. The book concludes with a lexicon, a series of manuscript images with short descriptions, an appendix consisting of the *Confessio Claudii* (CAe 1252) in Hiob Ludolf's 1691 edition together with an English translation by Ralph Lee,

¹ T. O. Lambdin, *Introduction to Classical Ethiopic (Ge'ez)*, Harvard Semitic Studies, 24 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1978).