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Glimmering Utopias: 50 Years of African Film

Cassis Kilian

Abstract: The history of African film began in the 1960s with the independence of the colonies. Despite all kinds of political and economic difficulties, numerous films have been made since then, featuring wide-ranging processes of consolidation, differentiation and transformation which were characteristic of post-colonial sub-Saharan Africa. However, these feature films should not merely be viewed as back references to specifically African problems. The glimmering fictions are imagination spaces. They preserve ideas about how the post-colonial circumstances should be approached. Seen from this perspective, the history of African film may be studied as a history of African utopias.

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“Le cinéma est arrivé en Afrique Occidentale vers 1900,” writes Ousmane Sembène:

Pour les ‘colons’ de cette époque là, c’est de la fascination. Une fête foraine. Pour les africains, une diablerie ... puissance de l’homme blanc (Sembène 2002: 44).

African intellectuals initially discussed film in the light of the fact that the colonial powers monopolised the new medium and hence controlled cinematic production and distribution. In the French colonies, Africans had been explicitly forbidden by the Laval Decree from making films in Africa themselves; however, they were not prevented from watching films. On the British side, attempts were made to use the moving images for propaganda purposes. The “Bantu Educational Cinema Experiment” produced films about hygiene and agriculture. However, westerns and Chaplin films, which were also shown, were much more well received (Burns 2002: 103-117; Ambler 2001: 81). Strict regulations were imposed by the censorship authorities in the British colonies: Certain films could not be shown at all, and others only in their censored versions. In contrast to this, the French colonial powers never succeeded in establishing a systematic method of censorship (Goerg 2009: 201-221). Frantz Fanon expressed concern at the increasing enthusiasm for white cinema heroes in the colonies. In his influential publication *Peau noire, masques blancs*, the Antillean psychologist confirmed with unease that there were no black heroes with whom the children and young people in the colonies could identify: As a result, the young people were alienated from themselves and unable to stand up for their own interests¹.

The Thrust of the Avant-Garde

Immediately after the wave of declarations of independence, an avant-garde formed which set about conquering Africa’s cinema screens under the motto “Décolonisez les écrans”. Ababacar Samb Makharam, who later acted as secretary general of the FESPACO film festival,² which was established in 1969, presented the film *Et la neige n’était plus* in 1965, in which he explores the odyssey of a young intellectual through post-colonial Dakar. Having completed his studies in Europe, the protagonist is unable to adjust to life back in Africa until, finally, he takes direction from his grandmother,

1 Fanon [1952] 2007: 124 [note 15]. Page 118f is also worth reading in this context.

2 The Festival panafricain du cinéma et de la télévision de Ouagadougou (FESPACO) takes place every two years in the capital city of Burkina Faso. It is the largest festival of African film in the world.

who embodies for him the traditional African values in which he professes his belief at the end of the film. The vision for the future presented in *Et la neige n'était plus* is the path back to the pre-colonial past. In an interview with the director, Guy Hennebelle, who published in *Jeune Afrique* and *Les cahiers du cinéma*, among others, refers to a much-quoted theory developed by Frantz Fanon in *Les damnés de la terre* in 1961. According to this theory, the development of an intellectual from the colonies unfolds in three stages: He begins by attempting to adapt to the culture of the colonisers. Because he only experiences rejection from them, he throws himself into his own culture and tries also to accept its negative aspects until, finally, he achieves a synthesis and can become a mediator between tradition and modernity. The journalist made the following comment about Samb Makharam:

Il m'a semblé que le héros de 'Et la neige n'était plus' appartenait à la première catégorie, que vous-même à l'époque du tournage de ce film releviez de la seconde catégorie (Hennebelle 1971).

This interview is instructive in that it clearly shows how important Fanon's concepts were for early African cinema. The question of cultural identity is central to *Et la neige n'était plus*; however, this question raises another, one that concerns an individual's responsibility in the post-colonial context, and this question remains central to African cinema even today.

Unlike Samb Makharam, Sembène focused on the question of economic power relations, which, for him, is more important than the question of cultural identity. His film *Xala* opened in 1974. El Hadji, the main character, is presented as a capitalist against the backdrop of a pan-African, Marxist utopia. In the end, he is forced by a group of beggars, who represent the impoverished but united population of the country, to take responsibility for his actions. Sembène summarises the development after independence as follows: The former resistance fighters took over the roles of the colonial rulers, but independence persists due to economic complications. The actor Makhourédia Guèye, who plays the president of the Senegalese chamber of commerce in *Xala*, bears a striking resemblance to Léopold Sédar Senghor (Murphy 2002: 122). At the very beginning of the film, he comments off camera:

Nous optons pour le socialisme, le seul vrai socialisme, la voie africaine du socialisme, le socialisme à hauteur d'homme. Notre indépendance est complète.³

3 Sembène allows himself here to parody "Senghor's notion of 'African Socialism'" (Murphy 2000: 112). See also Gugler and Diop 1998: 154 [Note 5].

At the same time, however, the viewer sees how he wastes the historical opportunity offered by independence because he allows himself to be bribed by a French delegation that has just joined the chamber of commerce. *Xala* was destined to be a phenomenal success on the African continent (Murphy 2000: 98). Not only Sembène, but also his colleagues aimed to reach as broad an African audience as possible. However, this undertaking proved difficult because many cinemas were tied down by block-booking contracts with Western film distributors. Because the production of celluloid films is expensive, most film-makers were dependent on subsidies from the West. France proved to be the most generous patron, but this meant that the directors had to assume the humiliating role of petitioning none other than the former colonial power.

Neocolonial Incursions

Hyènes, a film by Diop Djibril Mambéty released in 1992, features a teacher who teaches his pupils a song about freedom. The girls sing about birds who fly high into the sky, but when the camera follows the movement, it finds only a vulture slowly circling over their heads. Colobane, the small Senegalese town in which this film is set,⁴ is impoverished. When Yandé Codou Sene, President Senghor's *griotte* (storyteller), sang her most beautiful songs, things were better in Colobane. The town is now pervaded by hopeless resignation. However, a former resident of the town announces her return: Linguère Ramatou was in the West for a long time and is now richer than the World Bank. She promises to help the town but only under one condition: The inhabitants must kill one of their co-residents. Mambéty makes use of Friedrich Dürrenmatt's tragi-comedy *Der Besuch der alten Dame* (Dürrenmatt [1956] 1998) to portray the situation in Senegal in the early 1990s. Eighteen years after his role in *Xala*, the actor Guèye also appears in this film as the mayor, clad in a shabby old suit. His town hall has been seized; despite this, he tries to assert the independence of Colobane:

Linguère Ramatou nous sommes en Afrique, même la sécheresse n'a pas fait de nous des sauvages au nom de tout le village, au nom de l'humanité, Linguère, je refuse votre offre sachez que nous préférons mourir de faim plutôt que de nous couvrir de sang.⁵

4 Mambéty grew up in Colobane, which was already a district of Dakar at the time. However, he did not make the film in Colobane. The Colobane of the film bears no resemblance to the real Colobane.

5 Mambéty filmed in Wolof and later produced a dubbed French version.

The mayor's distinguished way of speaking, his upright bearing, his dignified certainty all seem anachronistic in an endearing sense. The visibly aged Guèye represents the era of Senghor here. Mambèty illuminates this period in retrospect in a gentler way than Sembène did in his day. The mayor will eventually give in to temptation, but Mambèty presents his failure in a melancholy light – he had no other option from the outset. When the teacher from Colobane makes one last attempt to prevent the fulfilment of the condition for the granting of the loan, he finds out that the billionaire had already bought up the city with all its industrial plants years ago – Colobane's inhabitants were already caught in the snare when they were still engaged in an honest struggle. “Votre espoir est fou, votre ténacité absurde, cette attente d'une vie entière n'a servi à rien,” comments their patron cynically. A film without prospects? Not entirely, as Draman Dramé, the man whose life the billionaire demands, becomes aware of old guilt and ultimately assumes responsibility for his action.

In the 1990s, technical innovations opened up new possibilities for African film-makers: The production of videos is cheaper than that of celluloid films, the distribution of tapes (later DVDs) is uncomplicated – African directors could finally produce films without relying on Western financing. A thriving film industry emerged in Ghana and Nigeria which succeeded in reaching broad sections of the African population (Haynes and Okome [1997] 2000: 51-88). Of course, video directors could not indulge as freely in experimentation because without subsidies they were dependent on the sale of the products.

In the most successful video comedy ever produced, *Osuofia in London*, part one of which appeared in 2003 and part two in 2004, a village dweller who can barely manage to provide for his family inherits a vast fortune. The film was directed by Kingsley Ogoro. Osuofia is a careless egocentric lout who constantly quarrels with his wife and daughters. In London, he behaves even more badly – the man from the Nigerian provinces is not at all lacking in self-confidence. He does not allow himself to be cowed by his dead brother's lawyer, who is after his inheritance. The lawyer is also of Nigerian origin and tries to blind Osuofia with technical terms from the world of finance, but Osuofia distrusts virtual money transactions and wants to see cash instead. The lawyer, a *nègre blanc*⁶ of the new economy fails with

6 The expression “*nègres blancs*” was used in the 1960s and 1970s to refer to members of the African elite who served the interests of the former colonial rulers and hence promoted neocolonial dependency. In many films of this period, the so-called “*nègres blancs*” are indicated by their costume, i.e. shirts and ties. The intensive pre-occupation of African intellectuals with Fanon's *Peau noire, masques blancs* probably contributed to the spread of the term.

Osuofia, who eventually proves to be a generous benefactor to the community back in his home village. This is also a parable on the responsibility of the individual in the post-colonial power structure, a utopia on a modest scale.

More Questions, Fewer Answers?

By the turn of the millennium, there was already a consensus that the pan-African, Marxist utopia which Sembène presented as the objective in *Xala* in 1974 could not be realised. However, the 2006 film *Bamako* by Abderrahmane Sissako is no less ambitious than *Xala*. The World Bank and IMF are put on trial in a courtyard in the capital of Mali. The prosecution witnesses report how the structural adaptation measures imposed by these organisations impact everyday life in Africa: the cuts in education, the privatisation of water management, the dismantling of the railway network, to name a few. At a seminar held at the Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz,⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak compared the strategy adopted by the director Sissako with that of Ignacio Ramonet. The latter had made an appeal in *Le Monde diplomatique* in 1997 for the establishment of an association that would support the imposition of a 0.1 per cent tax on all stock market transactions (Ramonet 1997: 1). According to Spivak, Ramonet did not believe at the time that his suggestion would be taken, just as Sissako would never have believed it possible that Africa would be capable of taking legal action against the World Bank. Instead, with the help of a hypothesis, with an “as if”, Ramonet and Sissako created a utopia with a pedagogical potential. In such a context, the current situation could be allowed to stand out with absolute acuity, and a forum for discussion was created in this way. Ramonet’s article gave rise to the establishment of the Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions and Aid to Citizens (ATTAC). Sissako’s film was very successful and prompted debate throughout the world.

The witnesses at the fictitious court in Bamako incriminate not only the Western-dominated institutions but also the corrupt elites in their own country – a theme, like many others explored in Sissako’s film, that runs like a red thread through the history of African film. Video directors now also tackle this theme along with others like migration, AIDS and the urban–rural divide. For example, the consequences of the attacks of 11 September

7 Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, “Interdisciplinary Seminar”, put on by the ZIS (Centre for Intercultural Studies) at the Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz, 7–17 January 2008. To my knowledge, Spivak has not yet formulated her thoughts on this matter in writing.

2001 are discussed not only in the courtyard that features in Sissako's film but also in a video film made in 2002. With a budget of barely 100 EUR and a shooting time of less than 14 days, a group of northern Nigerian comedians directed by Kabeer Umar exposed the search for Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction as a farce staged with the help of Western news channels. Equipped with a stethoscope and a tape measure, weapons inspector Hans Blix (played by the comedian Ciroko) patrols Iraq in a cowboy shirt. The camera shows a poor country. The head of the UN Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission assumes the role of a work-crazed anthropologist. Blix measures everyone who crosses his path with his tape measure and sounds out inanimate objects with his stethoscope. He quickly reaches a diagnosis: An old watering can is an ABC weapon, a long-out-of-service conveyor belt is used in the production of anthrax, a rusty mixing machine is an atomic weapon. Finally, he places his foot on a stone in triumph, a clear case: Uranium! He is accompanied by a man with a microphone emblazoned with the letters "BBC" – this is how opinions are formed! This dubious video film is called *Ibro Saddam* and can also be understood as a filmic discourse on a utopia. As the director told media anthropologist Matthias Krings, "Saddam Hussein was supposed to play the role of a brave fighter in an apparently hopeless situation" (Krings 2009: 54 [Note 10]).

Up to the 1990s, African directors displayed a particular interest in traditional religious practices and the fraudulent machinations of *marabouts*. Today, African directors are increasingly exploring topics such as Islam and Christianity, with the Pentecostal churches receiving particular attention. Not only is a trial staged in the courtyard in Bamako, but the faithful also bow to Mecca, and unemployed Chaka seeks consolation in a Pentecostal church but does not succeed in sharing the feelings of the born-again Christians.

While pagan rituals and the associated props and locations in video films often have to act as the substitute décor for horror films, the so-called conversion videos are put to the service of espoused religious renewal (Krings 2005: 183-205). Whether the filmic promises of salvation are formulated by an Islamic brotherhood, fundamentalist Catholics or a Pentecostal church, such visions cannot be as easily destroyed by facts as the Marxist utopia. This did not prevent the Nigerian video director Tony Muonagor from putting a satire entitled *Holygans* on the market in 1999. The Holygans had already tried their luck with other activities but it was not until they did business with a Christian message that real money flowed into their coffers: Disappointed women, in particular, seek support in their church, and one day a handicapped man arrives. He can barely reach the church bench with his crooked legs, and when he tries to sit down, his stiff protruding arms get in the way. Strong spastic jerks repeatedly permeate his

tortured body. A Holygan lays a hand on his head – suddenly his arms and legs are straight as an arrow and the newly born Christian can dance out of the church – a comedic showpiece of rare genius!

The criticism of Western and African societies is no longer as forceful as it was in the 1960s and 1970s – it is more subtle and quiet now, but, for all that, more trenchant. Many African film-makers trace these developments with forensic precision. The filmic reasoning of African directors is not usually limited to an analysis, but also usually refers to possible courses of action – the question arises, however, as to how a plea for a course of action can be captured on film.

Hopes and Bearers of Hope

As the author of a recently published essayistic reflection, the director Jean-Pierre Bekolo adorns himself with the resonant epithet “Obama”. He has big plans, his book is entitled *Africa for the Future*. The subtitle betrays what he aims to achieve with the project: *Sortir un nouveau monde du cinéma*. Bekolo knows that nobody is considering solutions to the current global problems that originate in Africa:

S’il ne fait aucun doute pour personne que l’Afrique c’est le passé, les origines de l’humanité ... l’idée du futur semble incompatible avec l’Afrique (Bekolo Obama 2009: 159).

Sembène and many other African directors took a different view here: They used film to open up new perspectives to its target groups and contributed to the realisation of the slogan “Decolonisez les écrans”. “Intelligere est phantasma speculari – Penser c’est spéculer avec des images” notes Bekolo (2009: 48). In this sense, cinema has a heuristic function for him:

Le cinéma est une étude comparée entre l’existant (le réel) et le possible (la fiction) (Bekolo Obama 2009: 48).

In the imaginative space that emerges in this way, it is possible for African viewers to project themselves into a future that they could themselves invent, writes the director (Bekolo Obama 2009: 46). This necessitates dismantling the concepts that constituted obstacles in the past:

Il nous faut briser d’abord l’Afrique inventée par le savoir occidental, comme il nous faut briser l’Orient, la Femme, l’Enfant, etc. (Bekolo Obama 2009: 128).

The fact that many of Bekolo’s African director colleagues have made similar observations is demonstrated by a comparative analysis of the roles con-

ceived by these directors as the bearers of hope. What is intended here are the black heroes which Fanon once missed when the colonial powers still had the monopoly on moving images. Moreover, something astonishing can be observed here: The heroes in question are female.

Manthia Diawara, one of the most renowned African film researchers, has observed that the motif of the emancipation of daughters is a central myth of African film:

Unlike the preceding myths, which are prevalent in oral tradition, this is a new story which is contemporaneous with the advent of the emergence of written literature and film in Africa (Diawara 1989: 203).

Although the protagonists of *Xala* and *Osuofia in London* have daughters who rebel against the female role their fathers try to impose on them, Sembène's bearer of hope, Rama, protests when her father, El Hadji, assumes the role of the omnipotent, polygamous family man in the house of his first wife. Osuofia is of the opinion that his daughters should finally get married, but Nkechi protests when she is no longer allowed to go to school. Her objective was to obtain a good education, not a husband. Whereas her sisters want their father to bring them cosmetics, miniskirts or pancakes from London, Nkechi only wants books – something that impresses even Osuofia. He is reliant on Nkechi's help as she can do calculations and write, things he is not able to do. Rama and Nkechi are more well educated than their fathers, like Beri, the daughter of a corrupt town commandant in the 1972 film *Lambaaye* by Mahama Johnson Traoré. Beri must confront her mother, in particular, like Anta, the rebellious student from *Touki Bouki*, the film with which Mambéty caused a stir in Cannes in 1973. Many of the rebellious daughters in African films bear a striking similarity to Anta: They are thin and often have short hair. Many authors describe their dress as masculine and appearance as androgynous.⁸ The female protagonist of the 2009 science fiction film *Pumzi* by (female) Kenyan director Wanuri Kahiu is a scientist and, judging from looks, could be Anta's sister.

The search for Western role models that could have provided a model for the conception of these female roles proves to be a futile exercise: Although female stars with an androgynous appearance have existed since the silent film era, intellectual female heroes are rarely allowed to appear on screen. Richard Dyer confirms this in reference to US cinema:

8 Cf. Mushengyezi on Sembène's female figures, in particular Mushengyezi 2004: 50. On Anta, the protagonist from *Touki Bouki*, cf. Porra 2009: 210.

It is no accident that there are similarities between how black men are represented and how women are depicted. Putting it at its broadest, it is common for oppressed groups to be represented in dominant discourses as non-active (Dyer 1986: 116).

Teshome H. Gabriel and many other authors situate African film under the general heading of “Third Cinema”, based on which they draw analogies to South American film (Gabriel 1982: 2). Glauber Rocha and Ousmane Sembène are viewed as the stylistic pioneers of the corresponding cinematographies. However, if one compares the Brazilian director’s female roles with those of the Senegalese director, significant differences can be observed: The women in Rocha’s work feature as either sufferers in the service of the good, or as uninhibited hussies. However, Rocha’s female figures all have something in common: They all sacrifice themselves to a megalomaniac revolutionary, the protagonist of the various films in question.⁹ Sembène’s heroines have a mind of their own – the “father of African cinema”, of all people, explores the problems of patriarchal structures, and in *Xala* he openly pokes fun at virile posturing and showing off.

The fact that women in Africa face particular difficulties in asserting their suggestions for future improvements is demonstrated by the work of the Burkinabe director Missa Hebié. His film *Le Fauteuil* was released in 2009. Whereas in many other African films, mothers are an obstacle because they want to preserve the traditional female role and prevent their daughters from conquering male domains for themselves, in this case, it is a mother who questions the status quo. She takes over the armchair of a chief, which had previously been occupied by only men. The new decision-maker’s scope for action is limited by a web of illegal arrangements, cronyism and corruption. The new chief has to fight for what she thinks is right with iron determination. She does not receive any support as her husband cannot come to terms with the fact that his wife’s career is more successful than his. The father does not want to fill the gap that arises in the family as a result of the mother’s demanding job, although their adolescent son, in particular, needs his attention. By the time the son finally ends up in hospital following a car accident, the mother has run out of strength; however, her perseverance has borne fruit and things change in her favour. Clarisse, the protagonist, knows that despite this, she still faces a long, hard road ahead – a utopia can only be realised in very small steps.

None of the bearers of hope in African film follow already-trodden paths. They all realise that they must embark on new roads. This should be

9 For example, the female figures in Rocha’s best known films: *Deus e o diabo na terra do sol* (1964), *Terra em transe* (1967), *O dragão da maldade contra o santo guerreiro* (1969).

understood on an entirely paradigmatic basis: A vision of the future for Africa can be only an individual one.

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- Fauteuil (Le)*, Burkina Faso (2009), D.: Missa Hebié, French.
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- Xala*, Senegal/France, (1974), D.: Ousmane Sembène, French/Wolof.

Flimmernde Utopien: 50 Jahre afrikanischer Film

Zusammenfassung: Die Geschichte des afrikanischen Films begann mit der Unabhängigkeit in den 1960er Jahren. Seitdem sind trotz aller politischen und ökonomischen Probleme zahlreiche Filme entstanden. Sie geben umfassende Konsolidierungs-, Differenzierungs- und Transformationsprozesse wieder, die für das postkoloniale subsaharische Afrika charakteristisch waren. Die Spielfilme sollten allerdings nicht nur als Rückschau auf spezifische Probleme Afrikas interpretiert werden. Diese flimmernden Phantasien stellen Imaginationsräume dar; in ihnen sind Ideen enthalten, wie den Bedingungen der postkolonialen Gesellschaften begegnet werden könnte. Aus dieser Sicht heraus könnte die Geschichte des afrikanischen Films auch als Geschichte afrikanischer Utopien erforscht werden.

Schlagwörter: Afrika, Unabhängigkeit, Kulturgeschichte, Film, Utopie