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Africa Shoots Back: Alternative Perspectives in Sub-Saharan
Francophone Film (review)

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LITERATURE AND THE ARTS

Melissa Thackway. *Africa Shoots Back: Alternative Perspectives in Sub-Saharan Francophone Film*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press/Cape Town: James Philip/Oxford: James Currey, 2003. x + 230 pages. Illustrations. Bibliography. Filmography. Index. \$65.00. Cloth. \$ 27.95. Paper.

Except for the enormous video production of Nigeria and Ghana that began in the early 1990s, filmmaking in Africa south of the Sahara has remained extremely constrained by scarce funding and severely limited distribution. Still, a substantial body of films has accumulated since the first feature films were directed by Africans in West Africa in the 1960s, and some of them have gained wide international recognition. Most of these film have been produced in the former French colonies, where filmmakers have had access to a measure of funding from French government agencies. *Africa Shoots Back* provides an excellent account of the films produced by filmmakers from Francophone Africa over the last four decades, even if the omission of Ngangura Mweze, the prominent Congolese (Kinshasa) filmmaker, is surprising.

As Thackway explores various topics, she touches on a large array of films. Many she discusses in considerable detail, and these substantial accounts cover just about all the major films from the region, including those, quite numerous, that have been shot in an African language and are thus not “Francophone” *stricto sensu*. Her summary dismissal of Idrissa Ouedraogo’s classic *Yaaba*, however, leaves a notable lacuna. Thackway provides a wealth of information, but the lack of references to the sources for some of it is a matter of regret. Throughout she draws on interviews she conducted with eight directors: Adama Drabo, Anne Laure Folly, Dani Kouyaté, Fanta Régina Nacro, Idrissa Ouedraogo, Abderrahmane Sissako, Cheick Oumar Sissoko, and Jean-Marie Teno, all but two at FESPACO 1995. These interviews are presented in the French original with an English translation in an appendix.

Thackway starts out with an accomplished overview of critical approaches to African film and their pitfalls. While highlighting their post-colonial character, she stresses the diversity of films from Francophone Africa and the need to evaluate them on their own terms rather than projecting preconceived ideas about what constitutes an African film. Adopting a contextualizing approach, she establishes cultural identity, representation, and voice as key issues in these films. She proceeds to argue the central importance of the tradition of orature and offers an extended analysis of the structural and stylistic influences of oral traditions on many films produced in the region. Her discussion ranges from the adoption of the tale structure in films that often feature griots and their craft, to the use of allegory and satire, narrative layering, circularity, repetition, and musical leitmotifs. She further explores the use of archetypal characters and the-

matic influences, in particular the theme of the quest and the introduction of supernatural elements.

Thackway's analysis of the role of orature in African film will stand as the classic exploration of this important topic. However, her strong focus on the role of oral literature risks neglecting other models that African filmmakers draw upon. The temptation is twofold: an emphasis on elements that can be related to oral traditions tends to omit other elements derived elsewhere, and some of the elements taken to reflect oral traditions might just as well be traced to other sources. After all, most of the directors were trained in Europe, usually in France. While Thackway touches on the analytical quandary in passing, she nevertheless extends her argument to relate the political and didactic commitment of directors to traditional understandings of art. But if one takes Ousmane Sembène, widely acknowledged as the pioneer and foremost director in Africa south of the Sahara, the commitment of this self-proclaimed Marxist is more plausibly traced to his experience as a dock worker and trade unionist in France than to African traditions, even if he has taken on the mantle of griot of his people. And the functional, thematic, and aesthetic dimensions of his films may be usefully explored in relation to his training in the Soviet Union.

A number of African filmmakers have committed themselves to recovering African history from the distortions of colonial historiography. The early films putting forward alternative African readings were set in the past, but Thackway focuses on more recent "memory-history" films that offer a point of view expressly set in the present to pursue a more personal, at times autobiographical, approach to African history, spelling out how they transcend conventions of documentary form and style to constitute a hybrid genre.

Especially welcome is her coverage of films set among Africans in Europe, principally France. By now African filmmakers have produced quite a number of films on the immigrant experience, but they tend to be neglected in African film studies. Thackway draws a distinction between a first wave of such films, which focused on the immigrants' experience of racism and exclusion, and a second wave in the 1990s, which tended to explore multiculturalism and integration. Many of these films show the solidarity of the immigrant community, explore the option of return, and affirm African values. Thackway pays particular attention to the topic of interracial relationships found in several films. If the first wave tended to portray such relationships as manipulative, sometimes motivated by fantasies of the exotic, the portrayals become less negative in the second phase.

Africa Shoots Back contains an extended discussion of the position of women in the films from Francophone Africa. A few women filmmakers have gained wide recognition. Most of their films are documentaries or semidocumentaries, and it is striking how most male directors pursue a similar progressive agenda in their feature films. As Thackway concludes, "these films by women or about women offer a radically new perspective on their lives and concerns" (178).

After publishing the pioneering works of Manthia Diawara, Françoise Pfaff, and Frank Udechukwu Ukadike, and Olivier Barlet's more recent *African Cinemas: Decolonizing the Gaze* (2000), Indiana University Press and its copublishers are now providing us with this fine study, as well as two more publications on African film: my own *African Film: Re-Imagining a Continent* (2003) and Françoise Pfaff's edited *Focus on Africa* (2004). They will give fresh impetus to the study and the teaching of African film and may well lead the way toward a wider appreciation of four decades of African filmmaking.

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Maxine Sample, ed. *Critical Essays on Bessie Head*. Westport, Conn.; London: Praeger Publishers, 2003. Contributions in Afro-American and African Studies, No. 205. xii + 150 pp. Index. \$61.00. Cloth.

Critically hailed as one of the brightest voices in African literature at the time of her death in 1986, Bessie Head and her oeuvre have remained the subject of ongoing scholarly discussion to this day. Head was not only a fine writer but she also came to literary prominence at a time and place of great significance in the history of southern Africa. Born of the union of a white woman and a black man in racially segregated South Africa, raised in a foster home and then in an Anglican mission school "for Coloured girls," Bessie Head's earliest years were fraught with uncertainty and the unrelenting reinforcement of a fragmented identity within a divided nation. When she immigrated to Botswana in 1966 on a one-way exit visa, "a single mother without employment, passport, or a place to call home" (5), Head embarked on a harrowing journey of statelessness, loneliness, poverty, and at times mental illness. For thirteen years the Botswana government refused to grant her citizenship while, at the same time, she was rapidly becoming the nation's best-known, most celebrated writer. As her publications brought recognition and some long-sought relief from financial worry, Head's perseverance, single-minded vision, and creativity allowed her to claim a stable, integrated personal and professional identity within a shifting and often hostile environment.

One of the newer additions to the already impressive body of scholarship on Bessie Head's life and work, *Critical Essays on Bessie Head* is a nicely balanced set of eight studies. The volume's editor, Maxine Sample, provides a brief introduction and two abbreviated but informative biographical and bibliographical pieces that bracket the other contributions, as well as a third essay on the novel *When Rain Clouds Gather*. Stylistically and methodologically, the essays vary in their density of theoretical discourse and in their complementary reliance on more literal historical approaches. The balance

Correction

The last paragraph of Josef Gugler's review of Melissa Thackway's *Africa Shoots Back* (48:1, April 2005), should have read:

"After the pioneering works of Manthia Diawara, Françoise Pfaff, and Frank Udechukwu Ukadike, and Olivier Barlet's more recent *African Cinemas: Decolonizing the Gaze* (2000), Indiana and its co-publishers...." Françoise Pfaff's book was published by Greenwood, Frank Ukadike's by the University of California Press, and Olivier's Barlet's by Zed.